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PREVIEW

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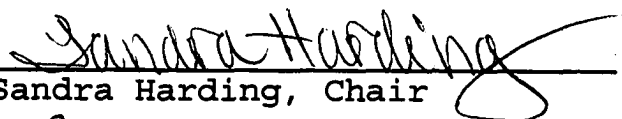
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MOLIÈRE, WOMEN, AND ABSOLUTISM: POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN  
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE


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Dedicated to all  
the wonderful people in my life  
who encouraged me to keep  
working on this project.

Also dedicated to the memories of  
Elinor Rutherford Bailey  
and  
Dr. Ellery Schalk

PREVIEW

MOLIÈRE, WOMEN, AND ABSOLUTISM: POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN  
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Historians have recently scrutinized the issue of women's political status in legal, social, and financial areas in France. The French crown's role in the apparent decline of women's status during the seventeenth century has been of special interest. The state regulated many aspects of women's lives in this period. Indeed, one of the characteristics of this period was the French government's struggle to win or require the complete obedience of all groups of the society, including women. In the battle against the chaos of the Wars of Religion (1562-1594), monarchs of the seventeenth century fought to chase away the "shadow of disorder and death" with a new concept of monarchy, which preserved order and protected life. In order to achieve this, the state needed cooperation. This came from members of society who were willing to give up some freedoms for the sake of peace.

Sarah Hanley views the adoption of absolutism as a concerted effort by men to control both family and state formation at the expense of women.<sup>1</sup> Other historians argue, however, that royal legislation concerning family and social order did not constitute a new set of laws which aimed

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<sup>1</sup>Sarah Hanley, "Women in the Body Politic of Early Modern France," Western Society for French History 16 (1989): 408-416.

specifically at repressing women, nor did it "aggravate or worsen women's juridical status."<sup>2</sup> Neither of these two arguments discounts the fact that the State in the early seventeenth century continually passed legislation designed to regulate every aspect of society, including laws about marriage and family, which deeply restrained the lives of women.

These works have brought us a certain distance, but there are still numerous questions to be asked about the nature of women's roles within the emerging absolutist state. In the seventeenth century debate began about perceived increases in women's political participation. The debate originated in the sixteenth century and coincided with the debate about absolutism.<sup>3</sup> In the seventeenth-century women increased their public presence in salons and at court, and conservative elements worried that this female intrusion into the public arena signified the destruction of traditional male and female roles. Other, more radical,

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<sup>2</sup>Annette Finley-Crosswhite, "Engendering the Wars of Religion: Female Agency During the Catholic League," in French Historical Studies 20 no. 2 (Spring 1997): 127-154; Natalie Davis, "Women on Top," in Society and Culture in Early Modern France (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 124-151; Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution 1789-1796," in Past and Present 53 (1971): 90-108; and Carol L. Loats, "Gender, Guild and Work Identity: Perspectives from Sixteenth-Century Paris," in French Historical Studies 20 no. 1 (Winter 1997): 15-30.

<sup>3</sup>Carolyn Lougee, Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 4-5.

elites used women's participation in the public sphere as a way to justify the inclusion of other minorities in court activities.<sup>4</sup> The seventeenth-century playwright Molière, a proponent of absolutism, saw women who exercised extreme public actions as threatening to the hierarchical order of society. However, when women maintained their domestic role in society, they could work together within the private sphere to change their circumstances. This thesis examines Molière's use of women to illustrate models of irresponsible leadership, warning his audiences of the harm that comes when men and women move too far away from their traditional roles.

Because debates about absolutism and the nature of women's political expression began in the sixteenth century, chapter one first deals with the political realities of the period from the years 1515 to 1610. The resulting chaos that occurred during this period is examined carefully. Second, in order to understand the political, social, and economic conditions of the seventeenth century, it is necessary to look at the earlier period. Certain mentalities and beliefs about absolutism and women developed during the sixteenth century, and while the more modern political institutions originated in this period, it is important to remember that many medieval ideas,

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 14-15.



institutions, and ideologies still remained. Third, the chapter explores the changes in the society that occurred after the Wars of Religion. While some attitudes and beliefs about women changed, their legal status remained the same.

Chapter two defines the type of monarchy that developed after the Wars of Religion, and examines the three different historical interpretations that outline the nature of absolutism in seventeenth-century France. Then, the chapter moves into a discussion of the French monarchy's adoption of the politique model of government, and the crown's attempts to consolidate royal authority in all parts of French society. Finally the chapter explores the reaction of all members of the society to the stronger monarchy. Despite the tightening of control by the state, women expressed themselves politically. The more public roles for women meant different things to the various elites in French society.

Chapter three presents the politique model of absolutism and examines the nature of women's political expression contained in the plays of Molière. The chapter includes an analysis of Molière's life and career, which link him to the elites who favored absolutism and embraced it as an alternative to the chaos caused by civil war. Next, the chapter explores in detail and chronologically L'École des femmes (1662), Le Misanthrope (1666), Tartuffe

(1669), and Les femmes savantes (1672). These plays are analyzed because they contain strong female characters which provide insight into Molière's beliefs about absolutism. Molière uses these plays to present French society with his model of good government and includes women's political expression as a symbol which warns French society of problems.

Chapter four summarizes the secondary work that has been written on the topic, and places my study within this framework. Then, it reflects the findings of chapter three, weaving the common threads and themes from the sources together to formulate conclusions. Molière believed that as long as the State exercised responsible leadership, women would remain in their traditional roles. However, when rulers acted irresponsibly, they forced members of society out of these positions, and this repositioning threatened the stability of the nation.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ORIGINS OF ABSOLUTISM--POLITICAL  
RELIGIOUS, AND SOCIAL REALITIES OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY

During the tenures of King Francis I (1515-1547) and his son King Henry II (1547-1559), France developed many modern institutions which, some historians argue, signal the beginning of absolutism. These new institutions existed in tandem with old ideas and beliefs. When the Wars of Religion broke out in 1562, chaos and violence tested old philosophies and tenets and forced the redefinition of political, social, religious, and economic ideologies. This redefinition also affected women. In dealing with financial hardships, religious controversies, political realignments, and social tensions caused by the wars, women encountered small windows of opportunity for political expression and independence. As women moved into the seventeenth century, these windows remained open, despite the limitations placed on them by the emerging absolutist state.

What was the nature of the political realignments and religious controversies contained in the Wars of Religion, and to what extent did the constructs of absolutism supplant old ideas and beliefs? How did the violence and disorder caused by the wars affect society? Also, what methods did women employ to cope with the political, economic, and social realities that existed during the wars of this period, and how did these methods provide women with more opportunity and freedom in the arena of political expression?

This chapter addresses these questions. Part one discusses the events leading up to the Wars of Religion and describes the political realignments of elites in their relationship to the development of absolutism. Since these wars were particularly violent in nature, and the bloodshed touched all levels of the society, they led to political and religious realignments that resulted in the adoption of absolutism as an acceptable means of governing the state. Part two addresses the effects of the wars on the various levels of French society. By examining the socioeconomic hardships, combined with the violence of warfare, a picture of how women coped with these conditions developed. In the struggle to cope with these realities, women adopted new methods of self-expression and more independence.

Part One: The Wars of Religion and the for Struggle  
Stability

The period of chaos and disorder known as the Wars of Religion represents a watershed between pre-absolutist and absolutist ideologies. The turmoil of the religious wars transformed elites and caused some elites to adopt the theory of absolutism as a model for government. Part one of this chapter describes the political roles of the monarch as head of the French state and outlines the monarchy's inability to function in this role during the Wars of Religion. The weakened State struggled to maintain order.

However, as chaos became the norm, elites began to search for different solutions. Their search eventually led to discussion--either pro or con--on the nature of absolutism.

For sixteenth-century French citizens, religion formed the fabric of politics and society. As far back as the Middle Ages, French kings were both consecrated and crowned during a coronation ceremony marking their ascension to the throne and symbolizing the intricate religious and secular roles embedded in the monarchy.

By the sixteenth century, the liturgical aspects of the ceremony emphasized the sacred role of the king. As the head of the Gallican Church, he had more authority than the Pope when it came to matters concerning the French church or clergy.<sup>1</sup> The coronation oath taken by the kings of France demonstrates this clearly.

I shall protect the economical privilege, due law, and justice, and I shall exercise defense of each bishop, and of each church committed to him, as much as I am able--with God's help--just as a king ought properly to do in his kingdom . . . To this Christian populace subject to me, I promise in the name of Christ: First, that by my own authority the whole Christian populace will preserve at all times true peace for the Church of God . . . Also, that in good faith to all men I shall be diligent to expel from my land, and also from the jurisdiction subject to me all heretics designated by the Church. I affirm by oath all this said above.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mack P. Holt, The French Wars of Religion 1562-1629 (Cambridge: Clarendon Press, 1995), 8-13.

<sup>2</sup>As quoted in Richard Jackson's Vive Le Roi! A History of French Coronation Ceremonies from Charles V to Charles X

This oath not only defined the secular responsibilities but also stressed the religious obligations of the monarch. These two areas of royal duties were extremely important in French society. When the monarchy tolerated heretical ideas and beliefs, the elites saw this as an abrogation of the crown's responsibility to protect the society from these destructive elements and therefore took matters into their own hands. The destructive heretical elements which threatened elites in sixteenth-century France appeared during Francis I's reign (1515-1547). The threat they presented became more serious as time went on.

In the early part of the 1500's the French crown began consolidating its power, moving toward a more centralized government. When Francis I ascended the throne in 1515, he started asserting his authority over the church. In 1516, Francis I and Pope Leo X signed The Concordat of Bologna. This agreement negated the earlier Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges (1438), which had allowed cathedral chapters to elect both bishops and abbots independent of either royal or papal authority. Under the Concordat the king directly appointed candidates for vacant bishoprics and archbishoprics and filled vacancies in the abbeys and monasteries of France. The Concordat gave Francis I a unique independence from Rome, giving him enormous power

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(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 20.

over the Gallican church.<sup>3</sup> Francis I used his new power to fill the episcopacy with his clients, relatives, and political allies. He encouraged a reciprocal system of personal ties, privilege, and clientage between the crown, the clergy, and the nobility. Francis I awarded church and royal offices to loyal nobles, appointed provincial governors, and also sold royal offices.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the Gallican Church ended up with a theologically uneducated clergy.

Of the 129 bishops whom Francis I appointed, 102 were princes of blood, or nobles of the sword, who came from powerful families of older lineage. These men owed their loyalties more to the king than to the church. Some bishops and archbishops had never set foot in their own dioceses. As the king's power grew, the French church's ability to handle its own affairs declined. Francis I created a church that did not protect his people from heresy, minister to parishioners, or teach proper theology.

As early as 1516, reformers attacked the corruption of the French church. Many Christian humanists, including Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Lefevre d'Etaples, began urging reform. Many French reformers moved from Paris to Meaux in 1516, when Guillaume Briçonnet, a student of Lefevre, became

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>4</sup>R. J. Knecht, Francis I (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), 53.

bishop,<sup>5</sup> wanting to reform the Gallican church from within, they avoided advocating institutional or doctrinal changes. Their approach caught the ear of the king's sister Marguerite de Navarre, who offered her support. Because of the king's close relationship to his sister, the Circle at Meaux also received his patronage.<sup>6</sup>

By 1523 however, the reform movement began to shift from a philosophy advocating reform of the church from within to a more threatening ideology, calling for reform from outside. Many newly-translated Lutheran tracts circulated throughout France. French intellectuals, including the Circle at Meaux, read them and sympathized with the Lutherans. This alarmed many conservative elite groups, especially those closely allied with the Catholic Church. Because Luther's ideas were clearly heretical, and had been condemned by the pope, the king's patronage of his sister and the circle at Meaux caused great concern among the elites in the Parlement of Paris and the Sorbonne. According to them, the king had failed in his responsibility to protect the Church and the society from heresy.

To defend the society from the destructive force of Lutheranism, the Parlement of Paris and the Sorbonne stepped in. These two institutions took it upon themselves to crack

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<sup>5</sup>Holt, The French Wars of Religion, 13-16.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 17.



down on heretical tracts and on persons caught distributing them. Francis I thwarted the Parlement's efforts and protected reformers until 1525, when he was captured by Spain after the Battle of Pavia. During the weak regency, headed by his mother, Louise de Savoy, the Parlement of Paris had more freedom to act without royal interference. With support from the Sorbonne, the Parlement burned Lutheran books, dispersed the circle at Meaux, and arrested, tried, and burned as heretics many Lutheran sympathizers. After many months in captivity, Francis I returned to the throne. Immediately thereafter, he reigned in the Parlement and the Sorbonne.

Francis I's policies of toleration might have continued, if the Affair of the Placards (1534) had never happened. This incident (a plastering of the walls and doors of Paris and other cities with tracts condemning the Catholic Mass) convinced the king that Protestantism was dangerous, and that it threatened to destroy the established order. Francis I took quick action and joined forces with the Parlement of Paris in fighting heresy. By 1540 the signing of the Edict of Fontainebleau officially recognized the Parlement's role in the persecution of heretics. Here, the King tacitly legitimized sharing his role for the removal of heretics with the Parlement of Paris.

Although Francis I had cracked down on heresy, the corruption of the church continued to be a problem. As long

as corruption existed, the voices of Reformed religion grew louder and the attraction to the new religion became stronger. After Francis' death, Henry II (1547-59) continued his father's policies of appointing clients to prestigious ecclesiastical posts. Of the eighty bishops appointed by the king, only three had theology degrees, only twenty-three percent had studied canon law, and out of eighty dioceses, twenty-one went to Italians.

In order to control the nobility, Henry II began to purchase their loyalty. The king opened up opportunities for advancement to nobles by awarding them more royal offices, appointing loyal nobles as royal secretaries of state to oversee various aspects of the government, and establishing four new governorships. These new royal offices divided France into four quarters, helping the king establish new lines of clientage and patronage directly responsible to the crown.

To obtain a governorship, a noble had to demonstrate loyalty. The king rewarded loyal governors with more authority, thus increasing their importance in the management of state affairs. As the king's influence in the provincial churches and the government grew, even more power shifted toward the monarchy. However, there were still areas outside of royal authority. For instance, local law enforcement and the direct supervision of taxation in some of the provinces remained in the hands of the independent

noble families who fought to maintain their own feudal rights and privileges.<sup>7</sup> Henry's rewards system helped to centralize royal authority, but at the same time, it did not rid the country of independent actors. Also, Protestantism made gains among the nobility. Many noble families disenfranchised by the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559 joined the ranks of the Protestants. Bad economic conditions that prevailed after the peace may have been one reason for the conversions, but another may have been the Calvinist doctrines which advocated the State's function as carrying out the will of God. Calvin's argument that any government failing to carry out God's will could legitimately be over-turned would later be used by Protestants to justify armed rebellions. This new insurgence of Protestants at court greatly alarmed militant Catholic elites, and the royal court began to divide along religious lines, testing Henry II's authority. Led by powerful men, four main factions developed.

One faction, the Guise family, headed by Francis Comte d'Aumal and Charles, Archbishop of Rheims, was militantly Catholic, and extremely ambitious. During Henry II's reign the Guises grabbed more and more power. Francis became the Duke of Guise and Charles became a Cardinal. The more

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<sup>7</sup>R. R. Harding, An Anatomy of a Power Elite: The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France (New Haven: 1978), 32.

powerful they became, the harder they pushed their family's agenda (preserving and promoting family interests and strengthening the power of the Catholic Church). The Guises placed loyalty to their own agenda before loyalty to either the State or the crown.

Another noble faction that developed was led by Anne de Montmorency, the powerful Constable of France, a moderate Catholic, who had Protestant sons.<sup>8</sup> Montmorency had a long noble blood line, but his power stemmed from his royal appointment. He and his sons placed their duty to the king before any other. When Henry II died, however, Montmorency's loyalty ended, and he was persuaded to join other power alliances.

The third faction, headed by Montmorency's nephew, Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France, embraced the Reformed religion and patronized the Huguenots. Coligny's faction favored tolerance of Protestant belief and was strongly willing to defend them. Coligny desired equal treatment for both Huguenots and Catholics, believing that the only acceptable monarchy was one that allowed toleration.

The fourth faction was militantly Protestant and violently opposed to Catholicism. Headed by Henry of Navarre and his younger brother Louis of Bourbon, the prince of Condé, this faction wanted to limit the power of the

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<sup>8</sup>See David Parker, The Making of French Absolutism (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), 28.

House of Guise. Advocating military resistance to Catholicism, Henry Navarre and his brother began organizing troops to resist the Guises' political and religious agenda. Whenever the monarchy was not allied with the Guise faction, the two brothers supported it. After all, Henry Navarre was in line to succeed to the French throne.<sup>9</sup>

Both Francis I and Henry II had been able to control these divisions of elites, but after Henry II died in July of 1559, the stage was set for power struggles at court. Francis II, a sickly boy of 15 was tied to the Guises by his marriage to their niece Mary Queen of Scots. Immediately after his coronation, the other three factions noticed a shift in the new king's loyalty. The militantly Catholic ideology of the Guise faction dominated the court. The Cardinal and the Duke of Guise monopolized Henry II's patronage system. Both men used their influence to control pensions and loans rewarding allies, thus trying to punish their enemies, especially moderate Catholics and Protestants. The Guises attacked Montmorency; he lost his position at court, and his estate at Beaumont, which Henry II had given him in 1527.

The two Protestant factions' suspicion of the government grew, and by 1560 a number of Protestant leaders sanctioned by the Prince of Condé, planned to kidnap the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 28-29.

young king, assassinate the Guises, and place a Bourbon on the throne. The Guises discovered the plot (the Conspiracy of Amboise) and punished the culprits severely. They also arrested Condé and sentenced him to death.<sup>10</sup>

In December of 1560, Condé received a reprieve when the young king Francis II died of an abscessed ear. At his death, Catherine de Medici became regent for her minor son Charles IX. She dismissed the Guises from court, released Condé from prison, and began to pursue a course which she thought would secure the monarchy for her son. Catherine asserted her independence from the Guises, and turned to toleration and partnership with the Protestant factions.

Ruling in the name of her son Charles IX, Catherine named Antoine de Navarre as first lieutenant general of the kingdom. Antoine had clearly tolerated Protestantism in Navarre. His own wife, Jeanne d'Albrect, publicly professed a belief in Calvinism, and his Protestant sons Henry Navarre and Louis Bourbon were militantly opposed to Catholicism. The royal adoption of toleration was reflected in the Edict of January, also known as the Edicts of Toleration, which officially recognized an organized Protestant Church in 1562.

The new course of action taken by the queen regent greatly alarmed the Duke of Guise and his followers.

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<sup>10</sup>J. H. M. Salmon, Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century (London: Benn, 1975), 125.

Militant Catholics criticized the crown for tolerating the heretical beliefs of the Reformed religion and abrogating its responsibility to expel heretics. The Guise faction formed an alliance with the moderate Catholic Montmorency, who feared the legalization of Protestantism, and Marshal of France St. André, who desired more power. This redefined faction vacated the court in protest over policies of toleration and began preparing for war, enlisting the aid of Philip II of Spain.<sup>11</sup>

Catherine's problems in maintaining stability were compounded by the financial state of the crown. Fifty years of war with the Hapsburgs and high inflation kept eating away state revenue. Francis I and Henry II were fond of rewarding patrons, by alienating "gabelles," "aides," and some "tailles" in the form of cash gifts. Because of reduced revenue, Henry II took out loans from Italian Banks, and the city of Lyon. At Henry II's death in 1559, the royal debt to the Lyonnaise stood at 11.7 million livres, interest payments ground to a halt, and it became impossible to raise new loans. Henry II's fiscal policies had led to a depleted treasury, and by 1562 Catherine de Medici could not raise the funds to pay her armies, weakening her position as ruler. As a result, she had to rely on other more financially solvent factions to help her.

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<sup>11</sup>Parker, The Making of French Absolutism, 29.

Thus a divided state led by a weak regent desperately tried to avoid war, but the stage was set for the beginning of The Wars of Religion. The wars broke out on March 1, 1562, when the Duke of Guise, determined to wipe out heresy and backed by Spanish troops, opened fire on a group of unarmed Protestants in Vassy. In April of 1562, the Prince of Condé raised troops. Resisting the Catholic groups led by the Duke of Guise and to avenge those who died at Vassy, Condé's forces marched up to the gates of Paris.<sup>12</sup> Fearing another Protestant conspiracy and the loss of the throne, Catherine rejoined the Guise faction. Royal troops and Guise forces drove the Protestants south, forcing them to sign The Peace of Amboise ending the first War of Religion in 1563.

The Edict of Amboise led to a brief respite from war. However, Catherine, wishing to increase support for the monarchy in the provinces and to keep the young king away from Guise influence, had him embark on a tour of the provinces. The tour lasted from 1564-1566. During the tour, it became clear to the regent queen that the Edicts of Toleration which were passed in 1562 were not being followed. Although the Duke of Guise and the Marshal St. André were killed during the first civil war, the Guise faction continued to resist the state's toleration of

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<sup>12</sup>Holt, French Wars of Religion, 47-49.