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From Ahab to “Vilain Herodes”: Biblical Models of Evil Kings in Catholic Anti-Royalist Propaganda during Charles IX (1560–1574) and Henry III (1574–1589)

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Abstract: During the French Wars of Religion, both the Huguenot and the radical Catholic factions started by stressing their devotion to the Valois monarchy, for reasons both pragmatic and ideological. Both were hoping for the support of the Crown in achieving their goals—the Huguenots to convert France to the Reformation, the radical Catholics to eradicate the Protestantism from the kingdom—and their propaganda made use of numerous Biblical references in order to urge the kings of France to pursue such policy goals. However, Biblical precedents could be a two-edged sword: once hope for royal support was replaced by disappointment and even resentment, the nature of the Biblical models and comparisons changed as well. From appeals to emulate the righteous kings from the Bible, like David, Solomon or Josiah, the propagandists moved to warnings and even threats, by presenting the kings of France with the fate of, this time, wicked rulers like Ahab or Herod, who were grievously punished by God for their transgressions. This paper aims to analyze the recurrences of such examples in the Catholic propaganda during the French Wars of Religion, until the death of Henry III in 1589, and their significance in the political discourse of that age.

Keywords: French Wars of Religion; Bible; royal power; Charles IX; Catholic League; Henry III



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1. Introduction

In 1993, the historian Mack P. Holt published in *French Historical Studies* an article-review, which analyzed a recent trend in the historiography of the French Wars of Religion, a trend that challenged the existing dominant interpretation and would proceed to reshape the understanding of this crucial period in French history: basically, professor Holt pointed out that the previous assumption, shaped by the works of historians such as James Westfall Thompson, J.E. Neale, Lucien Romier or Jean-H. Mariéjol, that the major causes of the civil wars that afflicted France between 1562 and 1598 were political and economic, was put under scrutiny and found wanting (Holt 1993, pp. 524–51). Mack Holt’s analysis relied on four recent (at the time) works of scholarship: Denis Crouzet’s *Les Guerriers de Dieu: La Violence au temps des troubles de religion (vers 1525–vers 1620)* (Crouzet 1990), Barbara Diefendorf’s *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (1991), Denis Richet’s collection of essays *De la Réforme à la Révolution: Études sur la France moderne* (1991) and Michael Wolfe’s *The Conversion of Henri IV: Politics, Power and Religious Belief in Early Modern France* (1993), contrasted with Henry Heller’s *Iron and Blood: Civil Wars in Sixteenth-Century France* (1991), which saw the French religious wars through the prism of class conflict. In place of the previous emphasis on political and economic roots of the war, the new approach, as deployed in the works of Crouzet, Diefendorf, Richet and Wolfe, “put religion back into the Wars of Religion”: in other words, it argued (and, in my opinion, proved) that religious tensions actually were at the center of the conflict and did not serve as a mere pretext, hiding under their mantle other kinds of ambitions and grievances. This trend was continued in the works of the same Denis Crouzet, who developed his argument further in *Dieu en ses royaumes: Une histoire des guerres de religion* (Crouzet 2008),

which examines the role of the religious imaginary in the development of the conflicts from sixteenth-century France, and of Professor Hugues Daussy, whose brilliant work *Le Parti huguenot: Chronique d'une désillusion (1557–1572)*, (Daussy 2015), portrays how the hope of converting the whole of France to the Reformation was a major motivation for the Huguenot movement during the fifteen years before Saint-Bartholomew. Over the last three decades, we can talk of an entire historiographical school that focused its studies on how religious factors shaped, in all manner of ways, the French Wars of Religion. Luc Racaut wrote *Hatred in Print: Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity during the French Wars of Religion* (Racaut 2002), an account of the rhetorical campaign, based overwhelmingly on religious themes, waged by the Catholics against their Huguenot adversaries, and Tatiana Debbagi Baranova delivered *À Coups de libelles: Une culture politique au temps des guerres de religion (1562–1598)* (Debbagi Baranova 2012), which studied the phenomenon of pamphlet literature during the indicated period and thus provided a picture of the Reformed and Catholic arguments hurled against each other in this propaganda war that took place simultaneously with the military operations. We also have Nicola M. Sutherland's *Henry IV of France and the Politics of Religion 1572–1596* (Sutherland 2002), which explains how religious considerations determined the political behaviour of Henry of Navarre from the Saint-Bartholomew until his absolution by the pope, and Nancy Lyman's Roelker's *One King, One Faith: The Parlement of Paris and the Religious Reformations of the Sixteenth Century* (Roelker 1996), which analyses how the Parlement of Paris tried to walk a thin line between, on one side, its Catholic piety and its concerns for the religious unity, and, on the other side, the need to find a resolution to the civil wars engulfing France. To this, it can be added Sophie Nicholls' *Political Thought in the French Wars of Religion* (Nicholls 2021), which gives an insightful account into the political ideas of the Catholic League and argues that its alleged "popular" radicalism was, in fact, a commitment to a traditional Catholic monarchism no longer represented by Henry III or Henry IV. One issue that has been less addressed in this scholarship, though, are the occurrences of Biblical references in the propagandistic texts of both sides and their use to shape the image of the king—for good or for worse. The Huguenot propaganda produced between 1557 and 1562, right before the start of the Wars of Religion, made use of the Biblical imagery of the ideal ruler in order to urge the French kings and other members of the royal family to convert to the new faith and lead France to the Reformation (Sălăvăstru 2021). However, the Bible also provided numerous examples of wicked rulers, who, because of their transgressions, met an unfortunate end. This paper aims to show how the radical Catholics, when disappointed by the behaviour of their kings, resorted to a discourse full of warnings and threats, by placing in front of the king the picture of the Biblical tyrant and his fate.

2. Results

2.1. The Historical Context

In medieval times and at the beginning of the early modern period, kingship was always surrounded by a sacred aura: the king was the defender of the Church, God's anointed, the source of justice in his kingdom and the preserver of peace. Additionally, nowhere was the prestige of the monarchy stronger than in France, where, starting from the fourteenth century, we witness the development of an authentic "royal religion", centred on a set of specific rituals, which made the King of France an almost "otherworldly" being, more than a mere human. Imbued, from his unction, with the power to perform a healing miracle, anointed with a holy oil, he alone amongst the Christian princes bearing the title of "rex christianissimus", the King of France stood apart, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, from the other rulers of Christianity and it was a natural consequence of this situation that French royalist propaganda saw in him a continuer of the Israelite kings from the Old Testament. It most certainly flattered the Gallican sentiments of the French propagandists to establish an equivalence between their kings and Biblical figures, such as David or Solomon, whose royal status was doubled by a special relationship with God. The Reformation, despite its mistrust towards the Catholic rituals that surrounded the King

of France, did not openly challenge this mystical prestige of the French monarchy: on the contrary, when Reformed ideas started making their first inroads into France, Protestant leaders, such as Calvin or Beza, pinned their hopes on the possible conversion of the French royal family in order to bring France into the Protestant fold. Regardless of the spread of Protestantism at the grassroots level, Calvin and his adherents, just like Luther, before them, in Germany, imagined the French Reformation as a top-down phenomenon, with a godly French king sweeping aside the so-called “papist idolatry”, in a manner similar to other such events described in the Bible as having occurred in the ancient kingdom of Israel. Therefore, the French Protestant propaganda during the period immediately before the outbreak of the Wars of Religion was full of appeals to the kings of France, either Henry II, Francis II or Charles IX, to take on the task of a religious reform in the kingdom, along Protestant lines, appeals that made heavy use of Biblical parallels, where the king was urged to imitate the examples of his illustrious Israelite predecessors.

However, the Bible could prove a double-edged sword in this regard: just as it could be used to exalt the monarchy or specific kings and argue in favour of obedience, it could also be employed to chastise kings and even to provide arguments supporting rebellion. That was because the Biblical theory of kingship was always conditional: a king remained king only as long as he obeyed God and submitted to God’s law. If the king transgressed against it and did not repent, the king would be cast down by God Himself or by the worldly agents of God. Granted, there was also the argument that the tyranny of a king could represent God’s punishment meted out on that specific kingdom for the sins of its people. However, this argument was accepted only if the king’s crimes were secular in their nature: a tyrant could be regarded as God’s punishment only as long as he limited himself to the violation of the rights of his subjects. If he harmed the Church or the faith, by supporting heresy, for instance, then the king became a traitor to God Himself and had to be resisted and deposed by any means available. Additionally, examples of kings who met such fate were always at hand, both in the Old Testament and the New.

2.2. *The Preachers of the 1560s*

Surprisingly, it was not the Protestants who availed themselves first of this material. Despite the slow breakdown in the relationship between them and the Valois monarchy, the Huguenots were reluctant to abandon their old hopes of converting the royal family and accept the hostility of the Crown as a given fact. Additionally, for their aristocratic leadership, treating the king as an enemy would have been totally against their aristocratic ethos, steeped in centuries of tradition, which saw noble revolts merely as a means of restoring a relationship with the monarchy compromised by other factors such as the interference of some ill-intentioned advisers. It was the Catholic preachers who, during the 1560s, and even before the start of the French Wars of Religion in 1562, made heavy use of the Biblical imagery of the evil king: these were not direct attacks on the king, Charles IX, but cautionary tales. The behaviour of the preachers can be easily explained when we consider the sixteenth century view on moral criticism directed against vices and abuses: in the words of Tatiana Debbagi Baranova, this kind of criticism, most often impersonal, was regarded as constructive, even “indispensable for the pacification of the kingdom and the reunification of the subjects around the project of purifying the society”, because “everyone had to take conscience of their own passions and vices and take control of their own correction” (Debbagi Baranova 2012, p. 62). Even the king was not exempt from self-correction and such harangues aiming to make him see his error had a long tradition, both in the Bible and in medieval history.

Undoubtedly, the Catholics took note of the Huguenots’ attempts to win the royal family over and reacted with great alarm, especially in the second half of 1561, when, for a brief while, such a thing seemed possible. Even the Parlement of Paris, usually a citadel of royalism, reacted negatively to the policy of conciliation between the two faiths attempted by the Crown: in 1561, it sent a remonstrance to the king, which disapproved of what seemed to be the intent of accepting the existence of more than one religion in

France, based on the edict forbidding the king's subjects to provoke each other on the subject of religion, and argued that, even though the intention was to eliminate sedition, the edict would actually encourage it, because people would follow whatever religion they pleased without fear of punishment (Roelker 1996, pp. 252–53). Consequently, the period immediately before the outbreak of the French Wars of Religion and immediately after saw an intense Catholic propaganda campaign aiming specifically to counter the claims of the Huguenots—and making use of a rhetoric with similar Biblical influences. There were even some radical voices, which, in a way, anticipated the anti-royalist arguments of the Huguenot “monarchomachs” from the 1570s and of the Catholic League of the 1588–1594. Such was the case of Jean de Hans, a preacher who is described by G. Wylie Sypher as having sought “to compensate for the negligence of the authorities by urging vigilante action against heretics” and who, in December 1561, “announced that the pope might legitimately excommunicate, depose, and confiscate the lands of any ruler who favoured heresy” (Wylie Sypher 1980, p. 79). How much of a threat these popular preachers were, both for the physical safety of the Huguenots—something which will receive a tragic confirmation with Saint-Bartholomew—and for the Crown's own policy of peace-making through religious conciliation, can be seen from the efforts taken to silence them: in 1561, a royal edict forbade the preachers from inflaming the population against the Huguenots on pain of death. However, from the Catholic perspective, this was an unacceptable interference with God's command to speak against false religion: the king was treading on a ground that lay beyond his purvey, by arrogating for himself the right to determine how and when the word of God should be spoken. If some preachers reacted by pleading with the king to rescind his order, others chose defiance, not only by continuing to preach against the Huguenots, but by launching their imprecations against the royal government and even against the king and the queen-mother themselves. This was clearly a bold step and a sign of things to come, because the criticism was no longer limited to the so-called “evil advisers” of the king, according to the medieval tradition, which insisted that no bad policy could ever originate in the king himself, but was always the consequence of an ill-intentioned entourage. In his *Mémoires*, Claude Haton describes the mood in Paris after the above-mentioned decree, where the preachers referred to the King of Navarre (as lieutenant-general of the kingdom) and to Catherine de Medici (as regent for the underage Charles IX) with the name of “King Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezabel, murderers and enemies of the priests and of the prophets of God in the Old Testament, and protectors and helpers of the false prophets of Bhaal” (Haton 1857, p. 211). It is worth pointing out that the equivalent of Ahab in Haton's description of the events from 1561 was not Charles IX, as Wylie Sypher argues, but Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, first prince of the blood and lieutenant-general of the kingdom: this is a reflection of both the tender age of the king (being around 11 years old in 1561, Charles IX obviously could not be made directly responsible for the policies of the government), and of the ambiguous attitude of Antoine at this time, attitude which made even Calvin believe that he could be relied on to lead the conversion of France to the Reformation. Antoine's commitment to Protestantism was actually much weaker than his contemporaries believed in 1561 and the outbreak of the civil war next year would find him firmly in the Catholic camp, but the hostile rhetoric of the Catholic preachers directed against him showed that the Huguenots were not the only ones considering that Antoine had been won over to their side.

These two Biblical figures, Ahab and Jezabel, loomed large in the Catholic propaganda of this period, being the Biblical analogy of wicked rulers that was the best suited to the political circumstances from the reign of Charles IX, as the propagandists needed a villainous female figure, paired with an equally evil king, to serve as counterpart for the contemporary Catherine de Medici. In a treatise called *Le Triomphe et excellente victoire de la foy, par le moyen de la véritable et toute puissante parole de Dieu*, a well-known Catholic theologian, René Benoist, referred to King Ahab and his Queen Jezabel as an example of a failed attempt to suppress the true religion, with the latter prevailing against all odds. In Benoist's account, the prophet Elijah was confronted by the entire apparatus of the

ancient kingdom of Israel, including “the princes and the priests”, who were “corrupted and depraved” and, thus, threatened to drag the people, as well, to idolatry; in the end, though, the faith of the people came through (Benoist 1566, Unpaginated preface). By the time Benoist was writing this tract, the critical moment, when it seemed that the royal family might embrace the Reformation, had passed: therefore, the threatening tone from the sermons of 1561 would have been totally ill-advised. For the radical Catholics¹ such as René Benoist, what was now needed was to get into the king’s good graces and persuade the latter that a policy of repression, not one of conciliation, was the best choice. According to Barbara Diefendorf, Benoist’s purpose was “not to threaten the king, but rather to enlist his aid in the holy war, the king being advised that he need not fear to remove and destroy the corrupt elements in order to cure the body of his kingdom, because heresy was a pernicious and contagious disease for which there was no remedy but the knife” (Diefendorf 1991, pp. 151–52). The role of Benoist’s Biblical examples was to point out that the true faith would always be triumphant, even in the most adverse circumstances, because it could always rely on God’s support: therefore, concerns that a war against the Huguenots would significantly damage the kingdom would have been meaningless in such a context. Additionally, by inserting Ahab and Jezebel in his narrative, Benoist was reminding Charles IX that the people could take upon itself this task of punishing the heretics, even in defiance of the royal will, just as it happened in the Biblical example. At the same time, this also shows the gradual disillusionment that was starting to seep into the Catholic texts regarding the behaviour not only of the king, but of the entire aristocratic class, seen as too dedicated to its material interests: instead, the hopes of the Catholic propagandists were starting to be placed in the people, whose devotion to God and willingness to fight for the faith were considered greater than those of the ruling orders.

This theme was reiterated by Simon Vigor, the most popular preacher in Paris in the period leading to Saint-Bartholomew: just like his contemporary René Benoist, he too was careful not to offend the king directly and constantly tried to avoid charges that he was preaching sedition. However, for Vigor, the story of Ahab and Jezebel illustrated what the attitude of a man of God should be in face of an impious king who undermined the faith: “If it is question of speaking in accordance with the Scriptures, we see that the prophets and those who brought the truth drew the hatred of those to whom they brought the word. [. . .] Just as we saw with Elijah, in the third Book of Kings, who brought the truth to Ahab and Jezebel and drew upon him their enmity: and for speaking the truth, they sought all means to kill him” (Christi 1580, p. 262). In order to understand the message Vigor was delivering here, we need to take into consideration that, on multiple occasions, he had faced the wrath of the government for his preaching against the edicts of pacification and their provisions (Diefendorf 1987, pp. 399–410). It is obvious that Vigor saw himself (and his fellow preachers) in the role of a new Elijah, tasked by God to bring the king (Charles IX) onto the right path, of war against heresy: Charles was not yet an Ahab, but he could be, if he persisted with his policies and persecuted the preachers like Vigor. Vigor adduced further examples in support of his argument: Hanani and King Asa of Judah, Jeremiah and the King Zedekiah of Judah or, from the New Testament, John the Baptist and Herod Antipas. Basically, what characterizes a tyrannical and impious king is a conflictual relationship with the prophets of God, whose messages the former ignores. Vigor is thus holding a mirror to Charles IX: if the king does not wish to follow in the footsteps of the Biblical tyrants, he should heed the warnings of the Catholic preachers. However, the example of Ahab, and of his confrontation with Elijah, was useful for Vigor in another way, as well: it served as a reminder to the king that his authority was limited by the authority of God. In a different sermon, Vigor brought up the complicated issue of sedition. The radical Catholics kept accusing the Huguenots of seditious intents, a charge that the latter denied, but, during the decade between 1562 and 1572, they often came to be themselves accused of disobedience, due to their defiance of the edicts of pacification. For Vigor, the idea that himself and the other preachers could be considered seditious for preaching the repression of heresy was downright absurd: for him, whether someone was a rebel was

not determined by the arbitrary command of the earthly ruler, but by the compliance with the divine will. Ahab was the rightful ruler of Israel; but he also “kept the people of God divided, whom he turned away from the true worship of God to have them bring sacrifices to idols” (Christi 1580, p. 379), and that completely delegitimized his rule. Just like the evil Pharaoh—another reference used by Vigor in the same sermon—Ahab became a tyrant and an usurper because he took upon himself a right to interfere with the worship of God, which could never have been his. The sentence is passed down directly by the prophet Elijah, who, when questioned by Ahab, laid down before the king the consequences of his behaviour. In this argument, we could find the roots of the violence often perpetrated by Catholic mobs against the Huguenots, in defiance of the royal will: the heretic was by default seditious, because his rebellion was directed against God. If the king disagreed, then he himself could be placed under the same stigma—something that was going to happen in the times of the Catholic League.

2.3. The Use of Biblical Imagery of the Evil King in the Radical Rhetoric of the Catholic League

After the death of Charles IX, the radical Catholics continued to urge the new king, Henry III, whose previous involvement in the third and fourth wars of religion as commander of the royal army and in the massacre of Saint-Bartholomew made them hopeful, to keep waging war against the heretics. After his coronation, the king was “reminded by the League polemicists of his oath to rid the country of heresy and reference was made to the crusade of Philip August leading the crusade against the Albigensian heretics” (Racaut 2002, p. 110). After the peace of Beaulieu in 1576, which granted significant concessions to the Huguenots, and especially after 1584, when Henry of Navarre became heir apparent, radical Catholics started to contemplate the possibility of resistance, displaying an even greater hostility towards the monarchy not meeting the expectations than previously seen against their Huguenot opponents. According to the typical mindset during both the Middle Ages and the early modern period, religious unity was crucial for the well-being of the realm: after all, political theory constantly emphasized the need for unity and concord, and, for the sixteenth-century man, there was no bigger cause for internal strife than religious differences. In this context, the king was bound by his coronation oath to preserve and protect his kingdom. If he failed in this duty, then he was in violation of the respective oath. More so, could it not be said that he was also breaking the divine law, because he was entrusted with preservation of the faith? Many Catholics certainly seemed to think so. Additionally, in the context of the religious wars, the king was not merely lacking in virtue or behaving like a tyrant by despoiling his subjects: he could have been endangering their salvation. Since, according to traditional political theory, kings were ordained by God to protect and preserve the faith, failure to do so meant that the respective king was not fulfilling the commands given to him by God. Even those who were cautious about the principle of resistance and advised obedience in human matters, argued that one had to oppose a lawful ruler if the faith was in jeopardy. Thus, the League pamphleteers considered that a king, being established by the people for the common benefit, may always be rightfully deposed for doing injury to the kingdom; obviously, in their opinion, the greatest injury was the establishment of two religions. Yet, despite their discontent with the policies of Henry III, the League tried for several years after 1584 to balance a traditional and apparently conservative rhetoric with more radical demands, seeking to limit the powers of the king and subject him to the authority of an Estates General dominated by radical Catholics. Frederic Baumgartner argues that, between 1584 and 1588, the greater part of the Catholic League was “conservative, monarchist and even reactionary, unable to accept changes in the Church or in the state” and saw itself as defending the kingdom against the threat of rebellious heretics, and it looked for lawful, or at least quasi-lawful, ways to achieve their ends (Baumgartner 1975, pp. 79–80). However, despite formal professions of loyalty, there were clear signs of tension between Henry III and the League, albeit they were yet to burst into open conflict: in 1584, two emissaries of the League asked the Pope Gregory XIII whether it would be advisable to kill the king, thus voicing the idea of regicide

(Sutherland 2002, p. 77). On 16 December 1587, the Sorbonne passed a secret resolution that “government should be removed from princes who do not act correctly” and there were multiple league plots against Henry III, while the latter issued threats of execution against the more seditious voices: Nicole Sutherland even considers that the members of the League were seeking a pretext for a rebellion, by provoking the king into making an arrest (Sutherland 2002, pp. 171–74). Even so, this situation could not have lasted for long, because the constant undermining of the royal authority by the League was bound to trigger a reaction from the king: and this reaction came in December 1588 when the king commanded the assassination of the most important two leaders of the Catholic League, the Duke Henry de Guise and his brother, the Cardinal de Guise.

This event triggered the most vicious campaign against the French monarchy, in the person of Henry III: for the Catholics, the enormity of the act, in itself a major breach of faith on the part of the king, was compounded by the fact that one of the victims was a prince of the Church, a cardinal—something that brought Henry III perilously close to a papal excommunication. The prestige of Henry III had already dropped to extremely low levels in the years and months prior to the events of 23–24 December 1588—hence why the Estates General that gathered at Blois in the fall of 1588 and were dominated by the Catholic League tried to wrest from the king the essential attributes of his sovereignty. Once the news of the assassination reached League-controlled Paris, the outcome was an immediate revolt—and not a revolt of the aristocratic sort, which usually tried to preserve some formal deference towards the king, but one of a truly radical bent, animated by the popular faction of the League, which dropped any pretense of formal respect towards the king and called for his immediate overthrow. The rhetoric of the League fully reflected this radical mood: in the words of J.H.M. Salmon, the preachers “called down vengeance on the head of the new Herod, while the Sorbonne anticipated papal action against Henry III by pronouncing the king’s deposition and calling upon his former subjects to take up arms against him in defence of the Catholic religion” (Salmon 1979, p. 246). As pointed out by Janine Garrisson, the argument of the Sorbonne was that “the king had violated the public faith in the assembly of the Estates” and “declared that his subjects were released from their allegiance”, the League breaking “with the Crown as decisively as the Protestants had done after the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew (Garrisson 1995, p. 382). That is an understatement, though, because, regardless of the shock provided by Saint-Bartholomew, the Huguenot propaganda focused on constitutional schemes meant to check the powers of the monarchy, but never became so personally aggressive against the reigning king. The propaganda campaign unleashed by the League against Henry III combined preaching from the pulpit with pamphlets² openly attacking the treacherous king, campaign that was accompanied by an attempt at purifying Paris from the now unwelcome symbols of the Valois dynasty: Nicolas Le Roux, following Denis Crouzet, uses the words “symbolical regicide” in order to describe the systematic destruction of the king’s representations (Le Roux 2013, p. 242; Crouzet 1990, vol. 2, p. 500). By Mathilde Bernard’s account, there were more than two hundred pamphlets published in Paris against Henry III until his assassination on 1 August 1589 and they depict the king as a “thief, impious, coward and sorcerer”, in an attempt to tarnish the image of the king and create a black legend, regardless of the truth (Bernard 2011, pp. 245–47). In this campaign, references to the most despised royal figures from the Bible abound, but one in particular stood out. On 29 December 1588, a Catholic priest, Jean Lincestre, launched an attack against the king, referring to the latter as “Vilain Herodes”, an anagram of the king’s name Henry de Valois, and argued that Henry III ceased to be king (L’Estoile 1876, p. 204). The use of the comparison with Herod was not unprecedented in the militant political discourse of the French Wars of Religion: it had been briefly deployed in the aftermath of Saint-Bartholomew by the disappointed Huguenots, although without having a significant impact (Daussy 2015, pp. 765–66). However, in 1589, this moniker was quickly appropriated by the League propaganda and became one of the most common references to the (in the opinion of the League, now former) king: David Bell indicates that over twenty pamphlets interpreted “Henri de Valois” as an anagram

for “Vilain Hérodes” (Bell 1989, p. 377). A pamphlet published soon after these events, *Les Meurs, Humeurs et Comportemens de Henry de Valois*, made use of the same comparison between Henry III and the infamous Jewish king, adding to this picture, for good measure, the equally reviled figure of Judas: for the author, the murderous king was “traitor and unfaithful like Judas” and, at the same time, dominated by “lechery, cruelty, hypocrisy and deceitfulness, like a Herod” (Le Roux 2006, p. 161; Lebigre 1980, pp. 172–74, 282). In *Le Theatre de France, Auquel est contenu la resolution sur chacun doute, qui a retenu la Noblesse de si joindre à l’Union Catholique. A Messieurs de la Noblesse*, Henry III is placed in a list that includes the likes of Herod, Nero, Caligula and Domitian and the traits that put him there are his cruelty and inhumanity (Crouzet 2008, p. 319). In *Le Faux visage decouvert du fin Renard de la France. Ensemble quelques anagrammes et sonnets*, the term of comparison for Henry III is Judas: the text interprets the name “Valois” as “O Le Iudas”, the symbol of supreme treachery. However, for the author of the text, Henry III had sunk even lower than the Biblical archtraitor, because “Judas was a traitor, but he had never made such promises” such as the ones the king of France was accused of having broken (*Le Faux visage* 1589, p. 11). For the author of *Le Faux visage*, Henry III was an utterly Machiavellian figure, who is contrasted with the loyal soldier of Christ who was Henry de Guise. This accusation, of appropriating Machiavelli’s most unsavoury political precepts, had haunted Henry III from the beginning of his reign, albeit at that time it came from Huguenots incensed by the massacre of Saint-Bartholomew (Claussen 2021, pp. 145–52; Knecht 2014, p. 164). Such extreme vilification of the king was necessary in order to justify the destruction of all royal symbols in the cities controlled by the League and, particularly, in Paris. In the words of Nicolas Le Roux, the chosen city, rejecting the figure of the false king-Christ surrounded by his supporters, placed itself under the direct protection of Christ the king. Although there were few direct appeals for regicide, the expectation for a miraculous deliverance was there (Le Roux 2006, p. 161).

However, the use of Judas as an archetype for Henry III did not meet with the same success as Herod I³, because there were factors that favoured the latter choice. First, the social position of the two characters: Judas was not a monarch and he betrayed his Lord, Jesus Christ, while Henry III was a king and committed his major act of cruelty against someone, Henry de Guise, who was nominally his subject. Judas had not ordered himself the death of Jesus Christ, he had only facilitated it, while Henry III personally commanded the assassination of the Guise brothers. The anagram “O Le Iudas” interpreted as “Valois” was not entirely convenient, because it extended the stigma to the entire Valois line—which included kings held in high regard by the League and who were also useful from a propagandistic point of view, in order to illustrate Henry’s own moral degradation in comparison with his predecessors, instead of focusing on Henry III only. On the other hand, Herod fitted much better. The name could be interpreted as referring to two negative Biblical characters, each notorious in his own way: Herod I, a morally depraved king who had ordered the killing of innocent children in order to defend his power and who had a truly miserable reputation of cruelty in both Christian tradition and pagan historiography, and Herod Antipas, the murderer of John the Baptist. It is not always made explicitly clear which Herod the author of a text refers to and, from a certain point of view, probably that was the intent: the coincidence of name allowed the League’s propagandists to merge in a single figure as many negative traits as possible, since no insult and no level of evil was too much, in their opinion, for Henry III. However, I would argue that, between the two, Herod I was the figure whom the Leaguer authors were thinking of, first and foremost, when talking of Henry III in such terms. I would base this argument on the circumstances surrounding the death of John the Baptist: the Gospels of Mark and Matthew portray Herod Antipas as reluctant to kill the prophet and he had to be manipulated into carrying out this deed by Herodias and her daughter, who became the principal villains in this narrative. However, Henry III was married to Louise de Vaudemont (a relative of the two Guise brothers), who retained a rather positive image in the League propaganda, which often contrasted her (genuine) piety with the deceitfulness and misdeeds of her husband.

Therefore, the Leaguers would not have wanted to cast aspersions on the character of the Queen Louise through such associations; more so, the image of a king who had to be cajoled into committing his crimes did not entirely fit the purposes of their propaganda, which portrayed Henry III as the originator of the “cruelties” attributed to him.

A brief reference to Henry III as “Vilain Herodes” can be encountered in the third impression of *La Vie et fait notables du Henry de Valois*, (attributed in historiography to Jean Boucher) based on the already mentioned anagram, which, in the opinion of the author, served only to illustrate the malicious nature of the king (Boucher 1589, p. 62): having in mind the long litany of misdeeds which Boucher attributes to Henry III in the narrative of his reign, this moniker serves as a fitting conclusion to Boucher’s attack on the king’s life. “Atheist”, “hypocrite”, “tyrant”, “despoiler of nuns”, blasphemer and desecrator of sacred relics, in a permanent alliance with the Huguenots in order to bring about the downfall of French Catholicism, there could be no better counterpart for Henry III than the despised Herod I of the Bible. For Boucher and other Leaguer propagandists, the match between the name “Henry de Valois” and that of the ancient Biblical king constitutes a divine prophecy, foretelling the true nature of a deceptive king, whose outward piety might mislead the simple folk and the less astute observers. According to Denis Crouzet, the royal cruelty serves as a providential awakening, as the death of the two Guises helped reveal the true nature of the king: if such a tyrant was given to the people of France, it was as a punishment for its sins and to arise the people from its lethargy (Crouzet 2008, pp. 314–16). If Henry III was cast as a villain by the Scriptures no less, then opposing him becomes a sacred duty that no good Catholic wishing to remain in God’s favour could deny and that surpassed any obligation tying the French Catholic people to Henry III. The oath of loyalty towards one’s king was indeed sanctified by the Church, but could an oath to a Herod-like figure be binding? The answer, sometimes implied, sometimes asserted directly, was obviously that it could not.

The image of Herod is absent, in particular, when the association with Henry III is less explicit: such was the case, for instance, in the official justification published by the city of Lyon in order to explain its adherence to the League. The text does not include many biblical references, but it uses briefly the examples of Saul, first, then of Ahab and Jezebel, as evil monarchs who forfeited the allegiance of their people because of their impiety and transgressions against the laws of God (*Declaration* 1589, p. 16). In this case, the purpose was not to illustrate Henry III’s wickedness, but to emphasize the lawfulness of Lyon’s decision to join the League’s uprising: for the sixteenth-century man, biblical precedent was the strongest evidence. A similar situation can be encountered in *Les Moyens tenus pour emprisonner Monseigneur le Cardinal de Bourbon pendant les Estatz tenus à Bloys* and in *Les Cruautez sanguinaires, exercees envers feu Monseigneur le Cardinal de Guise, Pair de France & Archevesque de Reims* (the texts of these two pamphlets are largely identical, except for the ending of *Les Moyens*, which adds a brief account of the military and political events until the alliance between Henry III and Henry of Navarre in April 1589). Here, the Bible serves (together with the tradition of the early Church) as evidence that the vengeance of God will always fall upon the tyrants persecuting the true faith. The biblical examples that this text uses are of “Sennacherib, king of Assyrians, who, for having persecuted the Church, saw all his army defeated at the hands of an angel” and “Antiochus, who, for the same deeds, saw a great number of worms coming out of his body and from whose odor his army was also infected” (*Les Moyens* 1589, pp. 11–12; *Les Cruautez* 1589, p. 9). Herod is missing from this list because the author does not use these examples to draw a direct parallel between them and Henry III: rather, he was seeking to illustrate the unavoidable fate of the tyrants—with the implicit expectation that the same fate will befall Henry III as well. The cautionary tale is not directed at Henry III himself: for the League, at that time, Henry III was past the point of no return and no reconciliation was possible anymore, the text aiming instead to strengthen the resolve of the League’s supporters. The author’s preference for these two biblical tyrants could be explained by the fact that both provide the example of the tyrant’s military defeat, not just his personal demise: in the Bible, God made sure that the

military efforts of both Sennacherib and Antiochus against the Jewish people met with utter failure. The League was hoping for another providential intervention, which could restore its military fortunes and its propaganda aimed at encouraging its adepts to regard such an intervention as likely.

Later in 1589, the alliance between Henry III and the head of the Protestants, Henry of Navarre, who joined forces with the purpose of retaking Paris from the Catholic League, triggered new rhetorical attacks against the king. One of them was launched by the Dean of the *feuillant* monastery, dom Bernard de Montgaillard: Nicolas Le Roux argued that dom Bernard restrained himself from openly calling for regicide (Le Roux 2006, p. 256), but the accusations and invectives that the latter directed against the king were more than ominous. “Traitor to the Catholic faith”, “excommunicate (. . .) removed from the body of the Church like a putrid member”, “parricide”, Henry III was no longer deserving of the royal majesty and the reverence that usually surrounded it. For dom Bernard, Henry III’s accusations of ingratitude directed against him were hollow, because any earthly obligations had to yield before the duty to God and to the Catholic faith, which Henry, in the opinion of the pamphleteer, threatened: as such, dom Bernard makes sure to drive the point home that the League will oppose him at any cost, even in case God might not grant them victory because of their sins. Dom Bernard’s warning reflected the military situation from May to June 1589, when the forces of the League were buckling under the pressure of the combined army of Henry III and Henry of Navarre. If the League was to lose, Henry III was not going to enjoy his victory, because he would then preside only over a ruined kingdom, matched by the king’s own spiritual ruin. It was up to Henry to decide what the fate of himself and of his kingdom will be: he could follow the biblical example of Nebuchadnezzar, “King of the Assyrians”, who, punished by God for his arrogance, “humbled himself before the Lord and remembered in misery what prosperity made him forget” (Montgaillard 1589, pp. 33–34). The comparison did not go as far as dom Bernard wished, because he urged Henry III to prove his contrition by abdicating his throne—something that Nabuchannezzar did not do—so that the Estates General could choose instead “a just, virtuous and Catholic prince, who would work efficiently to fix the damage that Henry III had caused, and under whose just rule this poor kingdom would find relief from all the miseries burdening it, and especially from this cursed and pernicious heresy” (Montgaillard 1589, p. 41). This was obviously a revolutionary request and something that dom Bernard de Montgaillard could not have realistically expected to be accepted: on the other hand, it might suggest that some members of the League were uncomfortable with the Sorbonne’s declaration of deposition from January 1589—whose legality was extremely dubious, hence the need to shore it up either with a voluntary abdication of Henry III or a papal excommunication. The way dom Bernard professes his former loyalty towards Henry III and the fact that he refers to the Estates General electing a new Catholic king only after Henry III had freed the throne shows that he was not one of the hardliners from the League—which also explains why he does not openly advocate for regicide in his text. However, dom Bernard points out three Biblical examples—“the stubborn Pharaoh, the arrogant Antiochus and the hopeless Herod”—which were to remind the king of the fate of the tyrant who persecuted the people of God, namely, spiritual and physical death (Montgaillard 1589, pp. 49–52). When Henry III was assassinated on 1 August 1589 by the fanatical monk Jacques Clément, it was nothing but the logical outcome of the religious frenzy which the rhetoric of the League instilled amongst its supporters. Additionally, even his death brought no respite for Henry III, as the League’s propagandists continued to attack his memory and commend the deed of Jacques Clément. Since Paris was still under threat by the royalist forces, now under the leadership of the new king, Henry IV, who was still a Protestant at this time, the exaltation of Clément served a useful purpose for a Catholic League that still had to keep the fervour of its adepts alive. For the League, the death of Henry III was only a first step on the road towards a France ruled by a pious Catholic king and from where heresy was definitively suppressed. A pamphlet called *Discours veritable de l’estranger et subite mort de Henry de Valois*, published anonymously by “a monk of the order of the Jacobins” (as

the pamphlet claimed), but which is attributed by historiography to Edmé Bourgoing, the prior of the respective order (Le Roux 2013, p. 255), depicts the tyrannicide as a miracle. The title makes this clear from the very beginning, when it refers to the death of the king as having been brought about “with divine permission”. According to the text, Henry III had brought “evil on his subjects, and mainly to those whom he knew as good and loyal Catholics, and enemies of the heretics and politiques of this kingdom” (*Discours véritable* 1589, p. A2). Henry’s guilt was threefold: against God, against the Church and against his honour. Thus, Bourgoing links the spiritual and the secular sphere of a monarch’s duties, in order to prove that Henry III had been in breach of both; therefore, he had no right to expect obedience from his former subjects. The image of the country, as a result of the war the king had unleashed in alliance with Navarre in order to recover Paris and crush the rebellion, is one of desolation. It is quite telling that the author of the text insists upon the atrocities carried out by Henry III’s troops: this way, Jacques Clément could be turned from a murderer into a righteous avenger of the injured people. More so, there is an additional reason why Bourgoing had to amplify the harmful effects of Henry’s behaviour as much as possible: to demonstrate that the king was on the brink of destroying his entire kingdom, which was the situation when even the most ardent royalists would have admitted that the king’s physical elimination was justified. Bourgoing invokes two biblical examples in support of his argument: that of the murder of Holofernes by Judith and of the Pharaoh drowned by God while in pursuit of the Jews. At first sight, the second example seems rather unsuited for this purpose: while also a tyrant, the Pharaoh was destroyed by God Himself, and not by the hand of a man. However, the intention of the author is to blur the differences between the two situations and establish an equivalence between them, by which to suggest that a tyrannicide is just as commendable as when God Himself delivers the punishment.

Biblical history is invoked (together with classical history) also in *Le Martyre de frere Jacques Clement de l’ordre S. Dominique. Contenant au vray toutes les particularitez plus remarquables de sa sainte resolution & tresheureuse entreprise à l’encontre de Henry de Valois*—an apologetic text aiming to justify the assassination of Henry III—in order to demonstrate that “there was no monarch, king or prince or other ruler who wanted to become a tyrant and did not suffer a miserable death”. The examples provided by the author are taken from the Old Testament: the Pharaoh, Sennacherib—whose army was destroyed, according to the Bible, by an angel of God, Rehoboam—who was “shamefully chased out of his kingdom” by his people because of his unjust exactions, or the infamous couple Ahab and Jezebel (*Le Martyre* 1589, pp. 6–8). The purpose of the author was not necessarily to associate Henry III with any of these figures, in particular, but to establish a model of a tyrant’s downfall, which the demise of Henry III could be equated with, even with the price of some inaccuracies in the references, since Rehoboam died a natural death, while the text implies that *all* tyrants met a violent end. Since “all actions and behavior of Henry III had no other end but to ruin the Christian, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church”, the implication is that his demise had been ordained by God, just like it had been the case with the Old Testament tyrants mentioned above. This is asserted directly, later in the text, when the author claims that “just like Ahab, God wanted him [Henry III] to die at the place of his treason” (*Le Martyre* 1589, p. 23). The action of Jacques Clément is depicted as analogous to the assassination of Holofernes in the Book of Judith (*Le Martyre* 1589, pp. 31–32, 37, 48–49) or to the murder of Eglon by Ehud in the Book of Judges (*Le Martyre* 1589, p. 49), with the Paris controlled by the League being seen as a modern Jerusalem.

Another work, called *Les Propheties merveilleuses advenues a l’endroit de Henry de Valois, 3. de ce nom, jadis Roy de France*, takes an eschatological perspective of the figure of Henry III, making his reign a part of the eternal struggle against evil, which started in the Bible with the fall of Adam. The implication of this portrayal was that Henry’s death was preordained: just as the devil could never triumph against the Lord, Henry III was doomed to fail in his struggle against the League. The text depicts the king as “the elder son of the devil”, quoting the words which Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, said “to Marcion the heretic”. In

this, the author of the text falls in lockstep with the overall League propaganda, which, after the alliance of Henry III with the Huguenot Henry of Navarre, presented the king as an utterly demonic figure. The constant references to the apocalypse of Saint John illustrate how existential the fight had become for a segment of the League, as far removed as possible from the traditional aristocratic revolt or even from the Huguenot rebellions: for radicals such as the author of the text, the fate of the Catholic faith in France was tied to the fate of the League. Therefore, no other outcome than a “true” Catholic king (which would have excluded both Henry III and, after his death, a potentially converted Henry of Navarre) could be envisioned. For the radical Leaguers, it was not just the fear of retribution that drove them to such extremes (although, undoubtedly, had he lived and entered Paris victoriously, Henry III would have exacted a bloody vengeance for all his previous humiliations): a victory of Henry III would have meant, from their perspective, a complete rearrangement of the confessional structures of France. In the opinion of the League, the presence of Navarre, a Huguenot, as the main adviser of the king served as evidence of their worst fears. In this context, the purpose of Henry III’s demonization is the complete desacralization of the king, the stripping of any vestiges of charisma that he may have retained from his former (according to the League) kingly state. The King of France was referred to as “the elder son of the Church”: but Henry III’s betrayal of the Catholic Church was so profound, so serious, that it turned him into an utterly unredeemable figure, a spiritual progeny of the prince of demons. The theme of the king as an oathbreaker is constantly emphasized, because it serves to establish a pattern of falsity and disloyalty: the Leaguer propaganda made a great deal of Henry III luring the duke of Guise to his death through a deceitful ruse and tried hard to reject the royalist accusation that the king was merely acting in self-defence, to prevent an attempt against his life by the duke. For the League, Henry III’s justification could not be believed because he had broken his most sacred promise, “to protect the Catholics”, and instead favoured the “heretics” over them. There are two biblical figures with whom Henry III is associated in this text, the Pharaoh “cruel tyrant, and persecutor of the children of Israel, people and servants of God”, and the “very cruel and miserable Antiochus”, and another two who are not mentioned by name in the Bible, but loomed large in the Christian tradition, namely Nero and Julian the Apostate (*Les Propheties* 1589, pp. 15–23). The removal of such tyrants rests upon the unassailable prophetic authority of the Bible, which was renewed in the early days of the Frankish royalty by prophecies made to Clovis and which referenced directly the fate of the French monarchy, finding their fulfilment in the disastrous reign of Henry III.

At the same time with the death of Henry III, Jean Boucher was finishing his biggest work and the most significant political tract of the Leaguer propaganda, *De Justa Henrici Tertii Abdicatione e Francorum Regno*. A tract that bore significant similarities with the Huguenot monarchomach theories, to such an extent that William Barclay in 1600, in his book *De Regno et Regali Potestate*, lumped Boucher together with George Buchanan and *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos, De Justa Abdicatione* was, in the words of Cornel Zwierlein, “perhaps the very first theoretical development of a theory to legitimate the tyrannicide of a crowned living king, not a prince or a king in general, but even directly addressing the specific person of either Henry III or Henry de Valois”. More so, Cornel Zwierlein suggests, although he generally agrees with Denis Crouzet’s general description of the apocalyptic fervour that gripped Paris and the whole of France in 1589, that the murder of Henry III was not “just an act by the individual Jacques Clément, inspired by an environment heated by apocalyptic preaching and a pamphlet discourse that used all rhetorical weapons against the beast Henry de Valois but would not have dared to openly and rationally speak of tyrannicide”, but it was a rather the cold-blooded consequence of a Leaguer political thought that declared the king “a criminal and a heretic”, the mere recognition of this fact transforming him “into a simple man and tyrant, threatening the commonwealth”– and this invalidated any oath of allegiance, while allowing and even compelling Henry III’s assassination (Zwierlein 2015, pp. 180–81). According to Sophie Nicholls, the case for a legitimate assassination in *De Justa Abdicatione* is based “on the existence of a Roman-legal

contractual relationship between king and people”, where the individual carrying out the assassination may be inspired by God, but could only act “once the tyrant is declared deposed by a representative body” (Nicholls 2021, pp. 68–69). *De Justa Abdicatione* is too large to allow a detailed treatment of its arguments in this paper: it is enough to point out some examples when figures of evil Biblical kings appear in order to illustrate the vices and the sins of Henry III. The Biblical episode of Herod Agrippa I, struck down by the Lord for accepting the impious praise of the crowd, is associated with Henry’s disregard for religious propriety, for “having placed his image above the altars, to be worshipped” (Boucher 1591, pp. 199–200). For the author, Henry III represents the culmination of a long list of tyrants, including Biblical-related characters such as Herod I, Ahab, the Pharaoh, Abimelech or Antiochus (Boucher 1591, p. 296). His hypocrisy and deceitfulness find a counterpart in the actions of the same Herod I, who falsely proclaimed his wish to adore Christ, of Herod Antipas or Nero (Boucher 1591, pp. 306–307). Boucher refers even to the insulting anagrams that were in circulation at the time, with respect to the name of Henry III, amongst which “Vilain Herodes” is the first included (Boucher 1591, p. 344).

The death of Henry III meant, in theory, the ascension of Henry of Navarre to the throne of France: the League’s efforts to depose Henry III turned into an equally fierce struggle to prevent Navarre from making good on his claim⁴. On the propaganda front, the League was no longer focused to justify its rebellion against a legitimate king, but to show that Navarre’s claim was invalid; however, the new Leaguer texts still blended attacks against the character of the former king with the argumentation against Navarre. Such was the case in *Arpocratie ou Rabais du caquet des politiques et jebusiens de nostre age. Dédié aux Agens et Catholiques associez du Roy de Navarre*, a pamphlet published in September 1589 arguing for Navarre’s illegitimacy. According to the text, Henry III had intended to “abolish religion”, to commit “many cruelties against the Catholics and the Churches”, to “sack Paris”, but God had prevented this, by bringing about the death of the tyrant (*Arpocratie 1589*, p. 7). The deliverance of Paris, which was besieged by the united armies of Henry III and Henry of Navarre at the time of the former’s death, is equated with the deliverance of the Jews from the “captivity of Pharaoh”; both this analogy and repeated quotations from the Bible, in particular from Psalms, are employed to emphasize the miraculous nature of Henry III’s death and of the lifting of the siege of Paris by Henry of Navarre weakened by the demise of his ally. The fate of Henry III was just because he was a “tyrant, public enemy and of the religion, who has shown himself as such and was declared so by public authority, and therefore it was allowed for any particular to slay him” (*Arpocratie 1589*, pp. 9–10). By constantly quoting the words of the Scripture, the author tries to conflate human tyrannicide with God’s; from the Bible, he invokes the example of the “proud and arrogant Pharaoh”, of Herod “whom the worms ate to the nerves and bone because he had persecuted the Apostles” (the manner of death suggests Herod I, albeit the reference to the Apostles might also imply Herod Antipas), of Ahab “put to death for demanding help from a foreign king, to whom he had promised the sacred vessels of the temple of God”, or of Sennacherib “who was defeated by the Israelites and his army routed by an angel, because he tormented and burdened his people with extraordinary taxes” (*Arpocratie 1589*, pp. 9–10). The purpose of the author is to normalize the deed of Jacques Clément: if Clément’s action was evil, it would have tarnished, at least in part, the League that benefited from it. The biblical examples (together with others from the history of early Christianity, such as the emperors Zeno, Heraclius, Anastasius, Leon III, Caligula or Julian the Apostate) serve to create a pattern of the fate of tyrants, with the implication that their death is caused, or at least approved, by God. By including Henry III in this history of doomed tyrants, the author of the text can absolve both Jacques Clément and the League from the charge of regicide.

In November 1589, another text directed against Henry of Navarre makes room, once more, for another attack against the defunct Henry III: he appears as “Vilain Herodes”, but in reference not to Herod I, but to Herod Agrippa. The author of the text uses this association to establish a parallel between the deliverance of Paris, which had been rescued

from “the chains of tyranny” just like Saint Peter “had been miraculously delivered from the chains of ‘villain Herodes’” (*Advis aux françois* 1589, p. 3), an obvious reference to the twelfth chapter from the *Acts of the Apostles*, where Peter is imprisoned by Herod Agrippa and rescued by an angel of God. The purpose of this biblical analogy is to establish Henry III’s “credentials” as persecutor of the faith: just like his Biblical predecessor tried to suppress Christianity in its infancy, Henry III attempted the same against the late sixteenth-century Catholic Church, and both failed. Since the struggle of the League is thus equated with Saint Peter’s evangelizing, the implication is that the League’s success was preordained by God—a key argument in a piece that, overall, was written as propaganda against the League’s new opponent, Henry of Navarre, now Henry IV.

Even one year later, although the League, at that time, should have been fully preoccupied by the threat represented by Henry of Navarre and by the problem of electing a new king instead of the Cardinal Charles de Bourbon, who, as the closest Catholic relative of the Valois line, had been proclaimed king by the League, but died in Navarre’s captivity shortly after, the animus of the Leaguers against Henry III could still be seen in the ever-present vilification of his memory. A testimony in this regard is provided by a tract called *Histoire des choses les plus remarquables et admirables, advenues en ce Royaume de France, és années dernières, 1587. 88. & 89. réputées estre vrais miracles de Dieu*, book dedicated to the Duchess of Montpensier, sister of the murdered Guises. The work is a narration of the history of the last years of Henry III’s reign and is replete with invectives against the former king: coming to the episode of his death, the author, Soffrey de Calignon, argues that Henry III was “justly called ‘Herodes vilain’, (. . .) more detestable than Herod of Galilee (. . .) because of his abominable life” and whom “we can compare with Heliogabalus and Sardanapal, for possessing in him all depravity and debauchery” (*Calignon* 1590, p. 63).

3. Conclusions

If there was a point of consensus in early modern political thought, shared by Catholics and Protestants alike, that was that Scripture, if it was properly interpreted, provided the model of the ideal government and the Biblical history of the Jewish kingdoms of the Old Testament represented God’s providential ordering of a polity. When the attitude of the Catholics towards the monarchy shifted from deferential to defiant, the Bible provided them with a theologically justified argumentation to support the idea of the deposition of a tyrannical king. The evil kings of the Bible set the precedent for a theory that ran contrary to the traditional medieval exaltation of kingship: the corpus of Catholic texts analysed in this paper invokes pretty much every negative figure of the Bible, to persuade, to warn and, in the end, to threaten. Amongst them, there were two figures that, depending on the period, seemed to be more conspicuous than others: Ahab and Herod. Ahab, as we have seen, was a recurring presence in the political discourse during the 1560s, but, during the rebellion of the Catholic League, after 1588, ceded the place to other figures, and in particular to Herod. Of course, Ahab did not disappear completely, any biblical tyrant was adequate for the purposes of the League’s propaganda. However, Ahab no longer had a preeminent place amongst the references used in the propaganda of the League and, when mentioned, he is not deployed as a direct counterpart to Henry III (except on one occasion), but, instead, he is just one ordinary example of tyrant destroyed by God. The explanation for this change lies in the historical circumstances surrounding both these Jewish kings and the kings of France during the Wars of Religion. One reason why Ahab was particularly fitting to be used as a negative example during the reign of Charles IX was because, in the Biblical narrative, his figure was always accompanied by that of his wife, Jezebel of Sidon. Similarly, Charles IX had beside him another queenly figure, that of his mother, Catherine de Medici, who also played a major role in the French politics of that period. If Catherine was to use her influence to promote the true religion, from the perspective of the Huguenots or Catholics, she could have become a new Esther; but if she did the opposite, she could be cast as a new Jezebel of France. By the time the rebellion of the Catholic League broke out, Catherine de Medici was no longer an important player in French politics and she

died, anyway, just several weeks after the murders commanded by Henry III. Additionally, there is a second reason why Herod was a more suitable figure to be used for a comparison with Henry III, it comes down to the rhetorical goals of the Catholic League and the crimes associated in the Bible with the figures of Ahab and Herod. Ahab's main transgression was promoting the worship of Bhaal; likewise, the main concern of both the Catholics in the early 1560s and of the Huguenots was the king siding with their religious enemies and thus supporting the "wrong" faith. The Ahab who encouraged idolatry was a fitting counterpart to a French king who might potentially do the same. However, in 1588 and 1589 the Catholic League was dealing with a king, Henry III, who displayed an ostentatious Catholic piety. Alexander Wilkinson points out that "one of the principal obstacles to the League's vilification of Henri de Valois was his image of religiosity" and "one of the most frequently employed methods of undermining this image was the exploitation of the theme of deception" (Wilkinson 2004, p. 150). Therefore, the Catholic League had to portray him as a "false Christian" and a "deceiver" and the model of Herod was particularly suited for this purpose. Unlike Ahab, Herod did not promote the worship of idols, but, at the same time, his actions were those of an enemy of God: he may have rebuilt the Second Temple, but his murders, and, in particular, the massacre of the Innocents, revealed his evil character. Similarly, Henry III may have declared himself a faithful Catholic, but the murders he had commanded also unmasked him as an enemy of God as well.

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Notes

- ¹ The term "radical" in reference to Catholic positions is used in the text to designate those Catholics who were in favour of an all-out war against the Huguenots, intended to completely eradicate heresy from France, and were strongly opposed to any accommodation with Protestantism. During the reign of Charles IX, the adepts of such a policy were opposed to the Crown's edicts of pacification—albeit without advocating rebellion against the monarchy at that time—and, during the reign of Henry III, they will coalesce into the Catholic League, which, from 1584 onwards, tried to prevent the recognition of Henry of Navarre as heir to the throne of France and, from 2 August 1589, as king. This faction would also become more hostile to Henry III, due to his perceived failure to extirpate heresy and general misgovernment, instigating the rebellion of Paris in May 1588, during the so-called "Day of the Barricades", and a general rebellion of the whole kingdom at the beginning of 1589, in answer to the assassination of the leaders of the League ordered by Henry III. The term "radical", frequently used in the historiography of the French Wars of Religions with respect to this faction, serves to distinguish them from an opposing line of thought, whose adepts were referred to as "moyenneurs" during the reign of Charles IX and as "politiques" during the reign of Henry III (the latter term being used pejoratively by the members of the League, as a sort of synonym with atheist), who accepted a possible accommodation with the Huguenots, refused to oppose Henry III and accepted Navarre as heir to the throne. Of course, the boundaries between factions could be sometimes porous: there were members of the League who were willing to recognize Henry IV as king once he abjured and there were supporters of Henry III who refused to join Henry IV after the former king was assassinated by Jacques Clément.
- ² Referred to in French-speaking scholarship as "*libelles*" or "*libelles diffamatoire*" and as "pamphlets" or (more rarely) as "libels" in English-speaking historiography, these were brief texts, usually between 5 and 50 pages in length, which were voicing crude attacks on Henry III, impugning both his policies and his personal character, and were calling for his deposition by force, some including even hints at the desirability of a regicide, without developing any kind of complex political theories. The majority of them were published anonymously, in order to avoid reprisals, and some lack any indication who printed them or about their place of origin; in case of those texts whose printers could be ascertained, they can be traced to the major cities controlled by the League, like Paris or Lyon. I do not have exact information about their print run, but we are provided information about how this material was disseminated in Paris, the main Leaguer citadel, by Pierre de L'Estoile—a Parisian official who remained in League-controlled Paris during the civil war—in his journal, where he points out that the pamphlets were read aloud in the streets by "*portepaniers*" (basket carriers) in the service of the Duchess of Montpensier, sister of the Guises (L'Estoile 1876, pp. 242, 279). Pierre de L'Estoile claimed in his journal to have amassed more than three hundred of such pieces, in order to show "the abuses, impostures, vanities and rages of this great monster of the League" (L'Estoile 1876, p. 279). Not all Leaguer-printed output survived: after his victory, Henry IV ordered a purge of the Leaguer political literature, as a part of his policy of *oubliance*, and many Leaguer texts went into the fire; the archives of the Parlement of Paris from the Leaguer period underwent the same fate, with Pierre Pithou and Guillaume du Vair, *conseillers* in the same Parlement, being entrusted with this task (Hamilton 2016,

pp. 288–93). However, the League’s printed propaganda was not limited to these pamphlets: official declarations or justifications of the League leadership, in particular of the duke of Mayenne, were also printed and distributed throughout the country and so were the decisions of the Leaguer Parlement of Paris (consisting of those magistrates who refused Henry III’s order to leave the capital for the city of Tours, where a royalist Parlement was being reconstituted). Additionally, the League produced some book-sized (or close to it) propagandistic texts: the best known is Jean Boucher’s *De Justa Henrici Tertii Abdicatione e Francorum Regno*, a sizable manuscript of several hundred pages; to this, it can be added smaller manuscripts like *Discours veritable de ce qui est advenu aulx Estats Generaux de France tenuz a Bloys en l’année 1588. Extraict des registres des Chambres du Clergé & Tiers Estat, pour estre envoyé par toute la Chrestienté* (1589), of 62 pages; *Dialogue du Royaume; auquel est discours des vices & vertus des Roys, & de leur Establissement: de l’Estat de la Monarchie & Republique, & de leurs changemens: du Devoir & Obligation du Roy vers Dieu & le peuple; & des justes causes qui peuvent esmouvoir le peuple à s’eslever & s’opposer à la Tyrannie & injustice du Roy* (Paris, 1589), of 142 pages; *De la différence du roy et du tyran* (Paris, 1589), of 54 pages; *Histoire des choses les plus remarquables et admirables, advenues en ce Royaume de France, és années dernières, 1587. 88. & 89 réputées estre vrais miracles de Dieu* (Paris, 1590), of 85 pages. The targeted audience of the pamphlet literature was, mainly, the domestic audience: it aimed to stiffen the resolve of the rank and file of the League and siphon support from Henry III’s party. It was, generally, too crude for any other purpose. The more elaborate texts, on the other hand, could be addressed to more distinguished audiences: for instance, *De Justa Henrici Tertii* of Jean Boucher was written only in Latin, and no French version was produced, which means that it was available only to a select audience (Latin-speaking) from France or abroad. A shorter anonymous version of this work, called *De justa populi Gallici ab Henrico Illlo defectione*, was used by the League in their campaign to obtain an unequivocal excommunication of Henry III from Pope Sixt V, a manuscript being sent to Rome at the end of March 1589, where it circulated within the papal curia (Zwierlein 2015, pp. 17–59).

³ I have found only one additional reference to Henry III as Judas in the Leaguer corpus of 1589, in *Le Martyre de frere Jacques Clement de l’ordre S. Dominique* (Le Martyre 1589, p. 44).

⁴ It is worth pointing out that the struggle between the League and Henry III/Henry IV also triggered a massive outpour of similar pamphlets across the Channel, in an England deeply invested in the failure of the League and the victory of Henry IV, especially after the latter’s ascension to the throne on 2 August 1589. Paul J. Voss points out that “nearly one third of all news pamphlets printed in the 1590s covered the events of Navarre in France” and that Henry IV “was clearly the most discussed and celebrated non-English personality of the Elizabethan period”, although this interest diminished after his conversion to Catholicism in July 1593 (Voss 2006, pp. 1055–56). The English pamphlets were supposed to report “news” from France, but, as pointed out by Paul J. Voss, the “pamphlets praised him [Henry IV] and the English forces in the most hyperbolic terms” and “only victories and enemy captures made headlines; the press did not report military defeats, shortages of food, notable desertions, or any other news that would suggest a failing war effort”, thus playing “ a useful role in the dissemination of state propaganda” (Voss 2006, pp. 1055–56).

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