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From Polemics to Wars: The Curious Case of the House of Guise and the Outbreak of the French Wars of Religion

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The religious wars that tore France apart from 1562 to 1598 offer the historian a sad cornucopia of examples to illustrate the theme of “religions in conflict: from polemics to wars”. During the years prior to the outbreak of open civil war, and then during the first decades of the conflicts themselves, polemicists on both sides of the growing confessional divide denounced their enemies, real and imagined, with a rich stew of invective that gave rise to a powerful set of hostile images of the other party. In the violence that followed, which was inflicted by both angry crowds and more organised armies, the hostile stereotypes often at once shaped and served to justify or legitimise the forms of violence visited upon the enemy. Thus, a rich vein of Protestant polemics depicted Roman Catholic clergy as swindling merchants selling false wares, or as fat, lusty cooks who filled their bellies with a rich stew of fraudulent bulls and dispensations. Examples include the satire *Satires chrestiennes de la cuisine papale* or the frontispiece to the 1564 *Taxe des parties casuelles de la boutique du Pape*. When Protestant ideas began to spread rapidly in certain regions of France in 1560 and 1561, high-spirited new converts shouted down clergymen who tried to remonstrate with them for their erroneous ideas: “Go to work, it’s high time! You fine merchants, learn to work: you have eaten too long without doing anything!” When Protestants seized control of cities on the eve of the first civil war, or when their armies took over towns during the civil wars, clergymen were the leading target of Huguenot violence and were reportedly subjected to such forms of ritual disfigurement as having their stomachs

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cut open and filled with oats, so that their bodies became fodder for horses.¹ Similarly, Catholic polemics often depicted the converts to what they called the new religion as libertines who had embraced the faith because it allowed them to escape the yoke of religious strictures against clerical marriage or eating meat during Lent and thus gave free rein to their uncontrollable lusts. Echoing charges made by pagan authors against the early Christians and then by defenders of orthodoxy against groups of heretics in the Middle Ages, they imagined that the secret nocturnal gatherings of such libertines could be nothing other than the occasion for promiscuous orgies. Thus, with the outbreak of crowd violence and civil war, Catholic crowds seized women known to have attended secret Protestant services, stripped them naked and hooted for them to give them the same kind of charity they gave their brethren.²

Examples such as these illustrate the larger point that under certain circumstances stereotypes of the other can at once encourage and shape violence, murder, and rape. Now we should be honest and admit it. A laudable moral impulse has driven much of the recent upsurge of interest among historians in the linked subjects of religious conflict and religious coexistence. The urge to understand episodes of religious conflict in the past is driven in good measure by the desire to avoid such conflict in the present. The urge to study religious coexistence in the past is driven by the desire to create the conditions for its successful implementation today. The historical record clearly demonstrates the dangers that lurk in hostile stereotypes of a demonised other and could even be seen as justifying the utility of contemporary laws that prohibit certain forms of insult or hostile speech directed at minority groups. But the cunning of history and the force of the law of unexpected consequences are such that we should also beware of viewing the connection between polemics and wars as being simpler or more straightforward than it in fact is. While hostile stereotypes of the other, and especially of less powerful others, certainly contribute in many situations to war or violence, by no means are all or even most expressions of hostile stereotypes followed by violence. Specifying the situations or conditions under which the hostile images of groups and individuals, numerous in any society, become activated politically and contribute to open conflict is perhaps even more important than simply noting the link between stereotypes and violence where it exists. Furthermore, the stigmatisation of individuals (even of quite powerful ones) as well as groups can also lead to violence under certain circumstances. This article focuses on one instance of this latter phenomenon, an instance that reveals one of the more complicated and surprising connections between polemics and war that can be observed in the history of the French Wars of Religion. This is the connection between the intense denunciation of the powerful aristocratic family of Guise in late 1559/early 1560 and the outbreak of open civil war between Protestants and Catholics in France two years later in early 1562.

The leading members of the house of Guise during the early years of the Wars of Religion, Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, and Francis, Duke of Guise, have recently been the subject of a striking historical revision. The standard narrative of this period long presented the Guise family as the great champions of intransigent Catholicism throughout the religious wars. In the years leading up to the first civil war, the Cardinal of Lorraine was cast as the chief advocate of the harsh prosecution of Protestant heretics. With the outbreak of the war, the Duke of Guise assumed the military and political leadership of the Catholic Triumvirate that drove the war effort against the Protestants. This is

the traditional view. But a growing number of recent studies have offered strong substantiation for a different perception of the Cardinal of Lorraine – a perception in fact anticipated by such leading early historians of this period as H. O. Evennett and Lucien Romier.³ According to this view, far from being an uncompromising champion of repression and strict orthodoxy, Lorraine was a man who worked sincerely from 1560 to 1562 to heal the emerging religious schism by defining a *via media* between the strict Catholic orthodoxy defined by the 1542 articles of the Sorbonne and Calvinism's equally dogmatic rejection of the rituals and traditions of the Roman Church. Less work has been devoted to the figure of Francis, Duke of Guise, in these same years, but the careful reading of many easily available sources from this period makes it clear that he was a far less enthusiastic advocate of tough action against the increasingly public gatherings of the newly formed Reformed churches than fellow members of the king's council such as the Constable Montmorency or the Cardinal of Tournon. At a critical moment when his putative rival, the Protestant Prince of Condé sought to defend himself in the king's presence against the charge that he had been involved in the Conspiracy of Amboise, the duke vowed to stand with Condé against all those who would impugn his honour and reputation.⁴ While in the last phase of the Wars of Religion, the period of the Catholic League, the Guises were the undoubted champions of the League's long struggle with Spanish assistance to deny the throne to the Protestant Bourbon Henry of Navarre, it now seems clear that historians need to be wary of projecting the family's position assumed in the 1580s and 1590s back into the 1560s. Vatican sources make it clear that the Cardinal of Lorraine, and not just Catherine de Medici, supported the gradual relaxation of the laws against heresy that characterised the main lines of royal policy from March 1560 to January 1562. Stuart Carroll has recently drawn attention to Lorraine's advocacy in 1562 of a series of liturgical reforms ranging from the elimination of statues from churches to the administration of communion in both kinds that he intended to have presented at a national council of the Gallican church in an effort to define a *via media* capable of satisfying both Protestants and Catholics. His pursuit of an earlier reunionist effort built around acceptance by both sides of the Augsburg Confession is well known, but this was long seen as the ruse of a duplicitous prelate seeking to drive a wedge between the Huguenots in France and the German Lutheran princes to whom they appealed for diplomatic and later military support. This new evidence about Lorraine's other actions around this time provides grounds for crediting him with less Machiavellian motives in advancing this project.⁵

If the revisionist view of the religious politics of the Guise brothers around 1560 is correct, however, historians have a new problem to resolve. While a considerable amount of apparently reliable evidence might suggest that the Guises were religious moderates as well as men of considerable leadership ability, learning, eloquence, and courtesy, numerous Protestant pamphlets and letters from these same years, especially from the period running from 1558 to 1560, assert that the Guises were the arch-persecutors of the young Reformed churches, depict the various members of the family as viciously immoral, and accuse them of being so swollen with ambition that they sought nothing less than to usurp the throne of France. Where does this view come from if it does not represent an accurate perception?

It is suggested here that the black legend of the Guises grew in large measure out of a combination of polemical necessity and the specific political situation in which the Guises found

themselves from the late 1550s through to the death of Francis II at the end of 1560. After the Constable Montmorency was taken prisoner by the Habsburgs at the Battle of St Quentin in 1557, the Duke of Guise replaced him as lieutenant-general of the royal armies. With the Constable in captivity and the Duke of Guise at the front commanding the French forces, the Cardinal of Lorraine emerged as the most prominent figure in the immediate entourage of Henry II at court. Guise influence grew yet greater during the reign of the young Francis II, since Mary Queen of Scots, the king's wife, was a Guise through her maternal line. It was a basic principle of political criticism in this period that unpopular policies be attributed not to the king who might actually have been responsible for them, but to his evil advisors. Protestant criticism of the harsh policy of repression initiated by Henry II toward the close of the Italian wars and continued by Francis II in the first months of his reign thus came to be directed at those who found themselves by their side at the time. The need to vilify the Guises was magnified exponentially in the wake of the failed Conspiracy of Amboise, when it became imperative that the young Protestant movement not be seen as having plotted to seize or attack the person of the king himself, but only to defend him against the evil councillors around him. Once the black legend of the Guise was established, a climate of suspicion surrounding the family was created that subsequent events would reveal to have unexpected and fateful consequences.

Insofar as this author has been able to discover to date, the first appearance of the identification of the Cardinal of Lorraine as the evil genius animating the persecution of Reformed Protestantism comes in letters written by both François Hotman and Theodore Beza in March 1558.⁶ Hotman is a central figure in our story. He was deeply involved in conspiratorial activity centred around the figure of Anthony of Navarre devoted to advancing the legal and political status of the young Reformed churches in France. He was also a man who was quick to divide the world between friends and enemies and to condemn bitterly those whose actions did not accord totally with what he thought was right. (By April 1561 his letters refer bitterly to Catherine de Medici as a tyrant and "Semiramus", even though her actions toward the Protestant cause from 1560 to 1562 might seem from a more dispassionate point of view to have been as generous as one could possibly expect from a ruler in her situation.)⁷ In 1558, he was also involved in trying to convince Germany's Protestant princes to urge their erstwhile ally Henry II to moderate his prosecution of heresy. Beza was also involved in these diplomatic efforts on behalf of the Reformed churches. The Cardinal of Lorraine was meanwhile not only the most influential figure close to the king at court, with Montmorency in captivity. He was governor of Metz, a free imperial city recently taken under French protection and close to Hotman's base in Strasbourg, where a crackdown on the Reformed community would drive several hundred families from the city in 1558. Most importantly, in early 1558 he was the point man for conveying to German Protestant princes the French government's position that they really should not care about the repression of Protestantism within France, since French Protestants were sacramentarians whose views on the critical issue of the Eucharist were at variance with their Lutheran opinions. This is the context in which Hotman and Beza first came to perceive the Cardinal of Lorraine as the arch-enemy of all Protestantism. All of the evidence suggests that the king himself took a back seat to no one in urging that peace be negotiated with the old Habsburg enemy so that the crown could turn its attention to rooting out the heresy that was growing within France. Still, as the

great ecclesiastical politician charged with implementing the king's policies, Lorraine came to be seen as their progenitor.

Suspicion of the Cardinal of Lorraine and of the House of Guise in general leapt from the private correspondence of men such as Hotman and Beza to the public arena after the death of Henry II. On Henry's death, the Guises went at a stroke from being one powerful family among several at court to being unquestionably the most powerful family of all. Within days of Henry's death, the sleeping arrangements at court had been modified so that the Guises, not the Constable Montmorency, occupied the rooms closest to the king.⁸ Ample research has shown the central role of the Guise in implementing the cutbacks in royal pensions and the peacetime dissolution of redundant army units needed to reduce the crown's mountain of debt.⁹ Meanwhile, for the first part of Francis II's reign, the crackdown on heresy begun by Henry II at the end of his reign continued, symbolised most famously by the trial and, ultimately, execution of the *parlementaire* Anne du Bourg, whose death made him at once the highest-born martyr of the Protestant cause to date and a symbol of the crown's tyrannical interference with the ability of magistrates to opine freely within the precincts of the Palais de Justice. In this situation of continuing persecution, those elements within the French Reformed churches who advocated concerted political action to turn around royal policy developed the rather questionable legal argument that the age of full majority for kings was 25 and that prior to that age the leading princes of the blood – that is to say in this context the great Protestant hope Anthony of Navarre – had a right to participate in all key decisions, and that it was legitimate for all subjects to aid them militarily in upholding their rights. From this theory grew the plots that led to the attempted seizure of the king at Amboise in March 1560 and the smuggling of arms into a number of leading cities in September. In all of this activity it was impossible to avow that the plotting was directed against the person of the king or that he was responsible for the policies that sparked opposition. Those closest to the king, the Guise, were scapegoated. Once the conspiracy of Amboise had failed, it was also important that the conspiracy be distanced as fully as possible from the cause of the Reformed churches, lest the plot confirm prior suspicions that the cause was by nature seditious.

Throughout the reign of Francis II (July 1559–December 1560), there thus appeared from Protestant presses a series of pamphlets that denounced the Guises in ever more hysterical terms. The first of these blamed the persecutions – setting all the squares of Paris aflame – on their evil influence. Later ones turned away from the question of religious persecution and cast them as depraved foreigners who aimed at nothing less than the throne of France. They were accused of claiming genealogical proof that they were closer in the line of succession to Charlemagne than the descendants of Hugh Capet and thus believing that they were the true kings of the realm. They were said to have illegally seized control of what by law should have been a regency government from which foreigners were excluded as the first step towards making good these claims. According to the *Just Complaint of the Faithful in France against their Papist and other Enemies*, the Cardinal of Lorraine was an Epicurean who believed in no god but himself and acted like a pope of France. His brother acted like the king. The pinnacle of this polemical literature of vilification came with Hotman's *Tiger of France*. "Fiendish tiger! Poisonous snake! Sepulchre of abomination! Spectacle of wretchedness!" this tract begins, "Will you never make an end of your

unbridled ambition, your pretences and thefts?" According to this work, the wise Francis I had warned his son against having anything to do with the Cardinal of Lorraine (in fact he named Lorraine his son's tutor and head of his household council), but Lorraine insinuated himself into the king's good graces by providing him with mistresses. The Guises were subsequently responsible for the loss of the Battle of St Quentin, the systematic corruption of the judicial system, and the destruction of the country's finances. Their personal morality was no less wretched: the Cardinal had an incestuous relationship with his sister, while his brothers routinely used murder and intimidation to get their way. For use against the many righteous enemies, the family had brought back 8,000 troops from Italy, infected sodomites all.¹⁰

The intensity of this campaign of vilification clearly arose first and foremost out of the domestic French situation, a combination of the unquestioned centrality of the Guises in court affairs under Francis II and the desperation of the Protestants to grasp at whatever straws the new situation offered them to obtain a relaxation of the intensified persecution and then to justify their attempted conspiracies while distancing them from the institutions of the Reformed church. But there was an international dimension to the suspicion of the Guise family as well. Mary of Guise, the sister of the Duke of Guise and Cardinal of Lorraine, was regent of Scotland until the Lords of the Congregation drove her from power and instituted the Scottish Reformation with English assistance. Following the death of Mary Tudor, French diplomacy and French royal ceremonial began to assert Mary Stuart's claims to the English throne at the expense of her half-sister, Elizabeth. The Guises were naturally seen by English diplomats as the great champions of their niece's dynastic claims, and this led to denunciation of their evil influence in English diplomatic sources as well. Thus, when Elizabeth and her counsellors publicly protested against the incorporation of the coat of arms of England into the coat of arms used by Mary Stuart at the French court, their protest denounced the insolent meddling of the house of Guise in the government of France. The letters of the English ambassador to France, Nicholas Throckmorton, deeply suspicious of Guises from the start, present them as the leading persecutors of French Protestants.¹¹ English diplomatic agents thus furthered the depiction of the Guise as overweening persecutors.

The combination of domestic and international perceptions of the Guises in certain circles created profound suspicion of their motives. When the policy of the French crown began to move from March 1560 onwards towards a moderation of the measures against heresy, and when in May 1560 the Cardinal of Lorraine began to suggest that a French national council might be called to discuss the religious issues dividing the country, English diplomats could only see this as a ruse. Christopher Mundt, an Englishman who lived in Strasbourg and knew Hotman well, wrote to Cecil that the proposal was a trick. The Guise actually intended to bring 8,000 Italian troops into the country to crush the Protestants by force as part of a larger pact between the French, the Spanish and the Pope that also involved the destruction of Geneva and an invasion of Bern.¹² In November the Genevan authorities received a tip from a certain Jehan Franc in Paris that the Cardinal of Lorraine had hired six English explosives experts to move to Geneva, take up residence there, and then set the town afire or mine its walls in conjunction with an attack on the city by troops massed in Lyon.¹³

No such invasion or gunpowder plot followed. The death of Francis II ended the period of Guise ascendancy at court. For much of 1561, Lorraine worked with the *moyenneurs* who were seeking some form of negotiated agreement to the country's religious divisions. The Huguenot pamphlet literature turned to different subjects. But, of course, the story ultimately would end in tragedy. Late in 1561, after the failure of the Colloquy of Poissy, the Guises left court, withdrew to their lands in eastern France, and early in 1562 went to Saverne to meet with the Duke of Württemberg and his theologians to explore what common ground they might be able to find starting from the text of the Augsburg Confession. On 1 March, returning from Saverne, the Duke of Guise and his men entered the little town of Vassy as the town's Reformed church was meeting for services. Just what triggered the subsequent massacre of Vassy is one of those mysteries that will never be known with certainty, since in the aftermath of the event each side set out conflicting stories, and there is no way of judging which is more accurate. The Protestant version was that the Duke of Guise armed his men in advance and went to Vassy with the intention of butchering the Protestants who he knew were worshipping there. The duke's version was that the violence was an unfortunate accident; he simply wanted to remonstrate with the Protestants for holding their services so close to a Catholic church, but when he went to do so, he was greeted with a hail of stones from a building that had been fortified against him, and when one of the stones drew blood from him, his men attacked the worshippers. Whatever happened, what was so critical about the massacre – in fact just one of a number of incidents of anti-Protestant violence at the time – was that the Duke of Guise was involved in it. While the Guises had been away from court, Catherine de Medici and Michel de l'Hôpital had cajoled an assembly of notables to accept the edict of Saint-Germain or edict of January granting the Protestants freedom to assemble for worship throughout the kingdom. This sparked angry protests from the majority of the Parlement of Paris, a hail of denunciation by Catholic preachers, and was opposed by a number of prominent noblemen, including Anthony of Navarre. On the other hand, it enjoyed enough political support that Beza, who was present at court at the time, had considerable hope that it could be implemented, and that once implemented it would soon lead to the triumph of God's cause in France. His letters from the months between the edict of January and the massacre of Vassy teeter back and forth between hope for a great breakthrough for the Reformed cause and alarm at all that the Devil and his minions were doing to oppose the edict.¹⁴ The Duke of Guise's involvement in the massacre of Vassy triggered all the established Huguenot suspicions of an international Catholic pact to destroy Protestantism. In the weeks that followed, Beza and the ministers and consistories of many of the Reformed churches dispatched circular letters to the other churches of the realm calling upon them to arm themselves against a general conspiracy throughout the realm according to which "our ruin and devastation is agreed upon, sworn, and en route to being presently carried out". The Duke of Guise "does not hide the fact that he intends to treat any Christian church he encounters in the same manner he treated that of Vassy", the church of Paris ominously informed that of Nantes.¹⁵ Soon, the Huguenots seized control of roughly a third of the major cities of the realm in what they presented a movement of self-defence against this threat. Their manifestos justifying their actions repeat the denunciations of "those tigers the Guise" found in the pamphlets of 1560.¹⁶ There were other massacres, but the involvement of the Guises in the massacre of Vassy explains why it was the one that is conventionally reckoned to have touched off the First Civil War.

From polemics to wars: the black legend of the ill-intentioned Guises formed from 1558 to 1560 was thus a prominent element in the Huguenot reaction to the massacre of Vassy in March 1562 that in turn precipitated the Huguenot takeover of cities throughout France and the outbreak of the First Civil War. Protestant fears of a Guise-led conspiracy to eliminate them can hardly be said to have been the only cause of the civil wars. The conflict also sprang, first, from a whole series of irreconcilable theological convictions and of hostile images of the other that took root in both parties; and second, from a dynamic of Protestant provocation, Catholic reaction, and the formation of paramilitary associations on both sides that, once started, was hard to stop. The cunning of history would nonetheless decree that a critical step in the sequence of events that caused the potential for violence contained in these ideological oppositions and hostile stereotypes to be actualised in open civil war was the involvement of the Guise in one of the religious riots of the early spring of 1562. Because a previous campaign of vilification directed against the family had already built up such suspicion of their motives, this incident was seen as the confirmation of a larger plot of extermination and triggered an armed response.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 For the rituals of violence and their roots in contemporary beliefs and polemics, the fundamental reference is Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu. La violence au temps des troubles de religion (vers 1525-vers 1610)*, Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1990. For the incidents cited: "Une mission à la foire de Guibray", *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 28 (1879), p. 462, reprinted in Alastair Duke, Gillian Lewis and Andrew Pettegree (eds), *Calvinism in Europe 1540-1610: A Collection of Documents*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992, p. 87; Richard Verstegan, *Théâtre des cruautés des hérétiques de notre temps* ed. Frank Lestringant, Paris: Chandeigne, 1993, p. 109.
- 2 G. W. Sypher, "Faisant ce qu'il leur vient à plaisir": The Image of Protestantism in French Catholic Polemics on the Eve of the Religious Wars", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 (1980), pp. 59-84; Crouzet, *Guerriers de Dieu*, I, pp. 240-50.
- 3 H. O. Evennett, *The Cardinal of Lorraine and the Council of Trent*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1930; Lucien Romier, *Les origines politiques des guerres de religion*, 2 vols., Paris: Perrin, 1913-14, II, pp. 246-7.
- 4 *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian. Vol. 7 1558-1580*, London: HMSO, 1890, pp. 182-4; also Stuart Carroll, *Noble Power during the French Wars of Religion: The Guise Affinity and the Catholic Cause in Normandy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 90-2.
- 5 Stuart Carroll, "The Compromise of Charles Cardinal de Lorraine: New Evidence", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54 (2003), 469-83; also Mario Turchetti, *Concordia o Tolleranza? François Baudoïn (1520-1573) e i 'Moyenneurs'*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1984; Thierry Wanegffelen, *Ni Rome ni Genève. Des fidèles entre deux chaires en France au XVIe siècle*, Paris, H. Champion, 1997, esp. pp. 152-7 ("Charles de Lorraine un Guise au service du concorde"); Alain Tallon, *La France et le Concile de Trente (1518-1563)*, Rome: École française de Rome, 1997.
- 6 Raymond Dareste, "François Hotman, d'après sa correspondance inédite", *Revue Historique* 2 (1876), 18-19; *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze*, 27 vols. to date, Geneva: Droz, 1960-, II, pp. 179-80.

- 7 Dareste, "Hotman d'après sa correspondance", pp. 28, 30.
- 8 *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian*, 7, pp. 107–9.
- 9 Robert Harding, *Anatomy of a Power Elite: The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1978, pp. 34–5.
- 10 *Mémoires de Condé*, 6 vols., The Hague: Dehondt, 1743, I, pp. 360–97, 402, 490–528; *Juste complainte des fideles de France. Contre leurs adversaires Papistes et autres*, "Avignon: Trophime des Rives", 1560, p. 23; Charles Read (ed.), *Le Tigre de 1560*, Paris: Académie des Bibliophiles, 1875, esp. pp. Aii, 43, 75; Henri Naef, *La Conjuration d'Amboise et Genève*, Geneva: Jullien, 1922, pp. 353–9.
- 11 Patrick Forbes (ed.), *A Full View of the Public Transactions in the Reign of Elizabeth*, 2 vols., London, 1740–41, I, pp. 144, 160–2, 227
- 12 *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the Reign of Elizabeth, 1558–1563*, 6 vols., London: Longman, 1863–9, III, pp. 29–30.
- 13 Archives d'Etat, Geneva, Pièces historiques 1689, Jean Franc to Amblard Corne, Paris, 20 November 1560.
- 14 Beza, *Correspondance*, IV, pp. 52–6, 63–8.
- 15 *Ibid.*, IV, pp. 254–5, 259–60; Dom Hyacinthe Morice (ed.), *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l'histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne*, 3 vols., Paris: Osmont, 1713–46, III, pp. 1302–3.
- 16 See in particular the *Seconde declaration de Monsieur le Prince de Condé, pour faire cognoistre les auteurs des troubles qui sont aujourd'huy en ce Royaume; Response des Habitans de la ville de Rouen, a ce que Monsieur le Duc de Bouillon ... leur a dict et remonstré du vouloir et Commandement du Roy; Remonstrance envoyé au Roy, par les Habitans de la Ville du Mans. Mémoires de Condé*, III, pp. 302–5, 319–33, 350–4.