The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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The Isabeau whose story I have just recounted appears above all to have been circumspect. During her lifetime, she was at best respected, at worst ignored. Even regarding the now infamous Treaty of Troyes, her contemporaries were not uniformly critical of her attempt to put an end to a conflict between implacable enemies, a conflict that had already caused extensive damage and promised to continue indefinitely. Of course she was reviled by the Armagnacs for her role in disinheriting the dauphin Charles. Still, even the Armagnacs did not unanimously despise her, many of them claiming that she had been forced against her will into the Burgundian camp, as I discuss in chapter seven.

None of the unfortunate queen’s actions accounts adequately for the scorn that she has aroused over the centuries and continues to attract to this day. Unlucky in life, as we have seen, she was even unluckier in death, victim of a concatenation of misunderstandings that over time crystallized into a dark mythology. In this chapter on the queen’s vilification, I take as a point of departure Pierre Nora’s notion of lieux de mémoire. For Nora, when cultures lose contact with their immediate pasts, they move from basing their identity on milieux de mémoire, meaning genuine collective memory, that is, “settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience,” to lieux de mémoire, taken to mean constructed memories, which they fabricate “because there are no longer any milieux de mémoire.”¹ True, Nora’s distinction has been challenged on various grounds, among them that milieux de mémoire are often already lieux de mémoire. Helpful as the binary may be in theorizing memory, I agree that a sharp distinction between the two cannot

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Isabeau lies there still today, next to the husband she once adored and then betrayed—as she had her lover, her children, and her countrymen. It is an ironic end for a woman whose one true allegiance was to herself, whose shifting loyalties cast aside all those closest to her.
be maintained in practice.² French writers of the fifteenth century, still potentially in contact with the living Isabeau, were already reflecting on her meaning and constructing collective memories of her against which to imagine their communities.

Still, the concept of lieu de mémoire in this broader sense clarifies why Isabeau’s negative reputation is so incommensurate with the generally positive ways in which she was represented during her lifetime. As a lieu de mémoire she has served from the very beginning as a repoussoir against which to construct French identity, and thus the created meaning of her career has always been more significant than the truth. To test this hypothesis in what follows, I explore the different layers of Isabeau’s vilification, explaining how her various meanings served over time as negative figures against which to create positive identities.

The oldest layer is her alleged promiscuity, which seems to have been floated shortly before her death by the English to justify Henry VI’s kingship. The image of the meddling political schemer is a somewhat later and independent development, appearing for the first time in some late sixteenth century treatises on female regency by legal historians, “the historical school of the parlement of Paris,” whose members, in addition to their official duties, “were concerned both with investigating historical problems and with ‘restoring to light the books of their own language.’”³ Many of their treatises present an innocuous image of the queen. However, some depict her negatively, with political intriguing and opportunism—but never promiscuity—as her chief sins. Increasingly distant from the ideology of feuding that had animated the fifteenth century, and guided by the assumption that women are fickle, some legal historians condemned the queen for the oscillating loyalties that they discovered either in Pintoin, whose narrative informs us who was allied with whom, or in the documents that record the alliances. The next development of the legend was the association of the queen with the Cour amoureuse, the Court of Love, whose charter was discovered in the early eighteenth century. Now in addition to her own shortcomings, Isabeau was the leader of a frivolous gaggle of courtiers. Finally all the different strands of the legend converge in the outrageous morality tale devoted to the crimes of the queens of France by Louise de Keralio. Here Isabeau is explicitly posited as a prototype of Marie-Antoinette. This character, the very incarnation of stupefying self-indulgence, spending money as her people starve and leading a wild and merry life at a corrupt court while committing adultery with her brother-in-law and eventually selling the country to the enemy,
represents the antithesis of the ideal *citoyenne*. This is the Isabeau who was then woven into nineteenth-century histories, whose authors added their anti-German sentiment to their reading of the Treaty of Troyes, even as they claimed to be examining the queen objectively. In this form, the queen’s legend was passed down to the twentieth century.

Isabeau has served a variety of purposes. As this chapter suggests, she represented something entirely different for fifteenth-century English rumor-mongers seeking to justify the English claim to the French throne than for sixteenth-century legal historians defining regency or eighteenth-century citizens justifying their overthrow of the monarchy. However, over the years, the layers of her vilification have melded into an all-purpose negative *exemplum* flexible enough to provide an antitype for most virtues associated with “Frenchness.” Exposing the various strands of the queen’s legend as constructions demonstrates starkly how a few misunderstandings can take on a life of their own. In the end, Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* is crucial to understanding why the legend has been so impervious to historical intervention. Her legend has been too meaningful to be dislodged through simple acts of demystification.

The Seeds of the Legend: Rumor of the Queen’s Promiscuity

The story of the queen’s promiscuity was circulating by 1429, but not before 1427. A Latin epic dedicated to Joan of Arc, the content of which suggests a date of sometime after the Maid’s first appearance but before her capture, therefore sometime prior to May 30, 1430, announces unequivocally that Isabeau bore Charles VII in an adulterous liaison: “Proh inauditum scelus incognitam femine vesaniam confessa est iuvenem se ex adulterio peperisse.” (Oh, crime unheard of! She revealed the unknown female insanity that she bore the young man out of adultery.) Formerly attributed to the Venetian politician and humanist, Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454), the epic is now believed to have been composed by an observer of political life living in Normandy.

However, the rumor could not have been circulating before 1427. An insertion containing what may or may not be a reference to a love affair between the queen and Louis of Orleans in the chronicle of Jean Brandon, monk at the Abbey of Dunes, *if taken to refer to the love affair*, confirms the rumor existed in 1488, date of the death of Adrien de But, the chronicler...
who made the insertion. A *terminus a quo* of 1427—if the reference is to a love affair—is provided by the date of the last of Brandon’s notes: his own contribution to the chronicle ends in 1414, but he left notes through 1427. Had the rumor existed during Brandon’s lifetime, he would have mentioned it in his text, that is, prior to 1427.

But does the insertion refer to a love affair? It reads:

Mors Ludovici ducis Aurelianensis, de quo Brando Johannes, Dunensis cronographus ponit quod comuni concilio baronum interemptus fuerit, licet Johanni duci Burgundiae imputabatur culpa mortis ejus. Legi quoque gallice scriptum, dum Parisius, ubi cum rege fratre suo dictus dux Ludovicus saepius amore reginae ac puellarum ejus esset, quadem vice convenisse Johannem ducem Burgundiae, qui, absente rege, suffere non potuit ut cum regina se oblectaret dux Aurelianensis: quare stravit insidias, scilicet per quosdam qui mortem intulerunt.

[The death of Louis Duke of Orleans, about whom Johannes Brandon Chronicler of Dune wrote that he was killed by common counsel of the nobles, may be attributed to Jean the Duke of Burgundy. Also, it can be read in a French work, that while in Paris, where, with the king, his brother, the said Duke Louis often was for love of the queen and her girls, he one time met Jean Duke of Burgundy, who could not stand it that the Duke of Orleans enjoyed himself with the queen when the king was absent; for this reason Jean spread jealousies, that is, among those who brought about the death.]\(^5\)

This insertion has been added to Brandon’s description of the story of the murder of Louis. In the Brandon text, on the same page, we read only:

Nam nullis luctus, ymmo cunctis gaudium de ejus morte fuit, cunctis asserentibus quod homo perniciosus et sceleratus, in manus suorum facinorum relictus, suis demeritis exigentibus, interiit. Dicebatur enim quia sacrosanctae ecclesiae hostis et scismatis auctor, unionem in ecclesiam fieri impedierit, viduarum et pauperum injuriator, matronarum nobilium et virginum etiam et sanctimonialium violator et infinitis facinoribus obnoxius, etiam fratris sui regis infestator, ejus langoris cause fuerit; quod insuper in mortem ducis Burgundiae, qui et comitis Flandriae, conjuraverit, insuper et populum gravibus exactionibus et tallionibus per Franciam oppresserit. Haec et multa alia fuerent de eo in villis tam Franciae quam Flandriae, praecipue Gandavi et Insulis, coram populo, per prae-
conum palam recitata. Fuit nichilominus de tanti principis occisione magnus inter omnes stupor et admiratio.
[For there was no sorrow, rather joy to all over this death, with all averring that the man was pernicious and criminal, and that he died, abandoned to his crimes, driven by his defects. It was said that because he was an enemy of the holy Church and an author of the Schism, he impeded the union of the Church, he was an injurer of widows and poor people, a violater of noble matrons and virgins and nuns and guilty because of many crimes, molester of his brother, the king, of whose feebleness he was the cause; that in addition, he conspired in the deaths of the Duke of Burgundy and Count of Flanders, and in addition to this oppressed the people of France through heavy exactions and tailles. These and many other things about him were recited openly by a herald, before the people, in cities in France and Flanders, especially in Ghent and Lille. Nonetheless, there was great astonishment and wonder amongst everyone at the assassination of such an important prince.]

The word upon which the insertion’s status as proof of an adulterous affair depends, se oblectaret, does not necessarily imply sexual pleasure; it often means “rejoiced” in a general sense. Such is the case, for example, for its use in Ecclesiastes 2:10, “cor quin omni voluptate frueretur et oblectaret se in his quae paraveram,” meaning “for my heart rejoiced in what I had prepared.” Thus the insertion might mean only that Jean was jealous that the queen and Louis enjoyed themselves together. If this is the case, the rumor could not have been circulating before 1427, for it would have been mentioned in this passage, already so full of invective. If we interpret the insertion as containing a sexual allusion, still, the date of the rumor can be no earlier than 1427. To reiterate, had it existed between 1414 and 1427, Brandon himself would have referred to it.

It appears, then, that Isabeau’s vilification began no earlier than six years before her death. What would have motivated such a rumor at that point, when the queen was leading a quiet existence, no longer involved in politics? It may be that in 1429, threatened by Joan of Arc’s sudden victory, the English would have felt the need to reinforce their claim to the throne. Once Joan was dead, the rumor may have faded temporarily, for it served no immediate purpose. But the English were forced once more to renew their justification for the throne of France as of 1435, when Philip the Good, son of Jean sans Peur, rejected his English allies and recognized Charles VII as king.
of France in the Treaty of Arras. At that point, the rumor may have been revived. This is suggested by the chronicle of Jean Chartier, named royal historiographer in 1437. In his *Chronique de Charles VII, roi de France*, Jean writes that the English shortened Isabeau’s life by diminishing her estate. But she had one more cause for sorrow, he continues: the English had spread a rumor that her son Charles was not the son of Charles VI.

Officially, the English did not believe Charles VII to be a bastard. Paul Bonenfant writes that “jamais, durant toute la période étudiée jusqu’ici—c’est-à-dire de la mi-septembre 1419 à la mi-février,—aucune accusation de ce genre ne se trouve avancée pour écarter le dauphin du trône. Le roi d’Angleterre se borna simplement à invoquer ses droits anciens à la couronne de France.” (never, during the entire period studied until now—that is to say from mid-September 1419 until mid-February—was any accusation of this type advanced to keep the dauphin from the throne. The King of England limited himself to invoking his ancient rights to the crown of France.) Nor is there any such mention in the arguments against the Treaty of Arras written by Henry VI’s secretary, Jean Rinel, in 1435. Nonetheless, the fact that claims to the English throne had on other occasions been countered with the charge that the claimant was illegitimate allows one to imagine that the English may have employed a similar strategy toward the French to harm Charles VII, surreptitiously, through rumor. The Yorkist claim to the throne was disputed with the charge of illegitimacy. Richard of York based his claim to the throne on his relation to Lionel, Duke of Clarence, second son of Edward III (as opposed to the Lancasters, whose claim came through John of Gaunt, third son of Edward III), through his great-grandmother, Philippa, daughter of Lionel, Duke of Clarence. In his polemical booklets defending the Lancasters, Sir John Fortescue proclaimed that Philippa was illegitimate.

It is difficult to know how quickly or how widely the rumor spread once it was reignited. A number of examples of what modern historians have taken to be proof that it was circulating in the fifteenth century can be dismissed outright as misinterpretations, and others appear less than certain when they are closely examined. Some examples that must be dismissed include the myth that Joan of Arc gained the trust of Charles VII by revealing to him that he was not illegitimate but the true king of France. The chroniclers of Joan of Arc never claim this to be what the Maid told the king. Thomas Basin, chronicler of Charles VII, for example, writes simply that Joan had gone to Charles and revealed a secret. Charles related that “eam sibi tam secreta atque occulta, ad dictorum fidem adduxisse, que nullus morta-
lium preter seipsum, nisi divinitus habita revelacione, scire potuisset” (she revealed a secret to him such that he was led to faith in the sayings, a secret that no living person except himself could have known, except through a divine revelation). Only if one already assumes Charles to have believed that he was illegitimate, a proposition for which there is no evidence, can one assume this to be the secret revealed by Joan.

Another example that must be dismissed is the allegorical pastoral, known as the Pastoralet, dated ca. 1422–25, which has long been cited as evidence that Isabeau and Louis were believed by their contemporaries to be involved in a romantic liaison. The allegory relates the story of the Armagnac-Burgundian war through a dispute among shepherds, two of whom are engaged in a love affair. The pair is identified by the anonymous author as representing Louis of Orleans and Isabeau. However, the argument that this allegory reflects a contemporary rumor is very weak; indeed, the argument reverses the very premise of allegory as it is generally understood. As the author of the Pastoralet explains, his project is to recount facts in the form of “flables couvertes” (line 13, page 39). In other words, the truth will be told through fiction; the fiction is not the truth. But the adultery occurs on the fictitious level of the allegory (i.e., the story of the shepherds). The love affair is the object that must be interpreted to discover the truth, which must be in this case that Louis and Isabeau were political allies. To read the love affair as a literal truth is the same as to understand Orwell’s allegory of the Russian revolution to mean that farm animals took over the country, or, to choose a medieval example, to assume that Christine de Pizan actually encountered three women called Raison, Droiture, and Justice. Of course, it may be the case that later readers of the Pastoralet unschooled in reading allegory mistook the work for a revelation of an affair between Louis and Isabeau. Still, there is no reason to imagine the original author of the Pastoralet to have been so ignorant of the conventions of the allegory he employed to tell his story.

As for likely or at least possible mentions of the rumor, a chronicle of Metz of 1438 by Jaique Dex may or may not pronounce Louis the lover of Isabeau. About Louis, to whom the chronicler is very partial, it is stated: “Et le tenoit on encore pour soupet de la royne, et lez mescreoit on moult fort la royne et lui” (And he was still held to be the “soupet” of the queen and they mistrusted him and the queen very much). The word describing Louis’s relationship to the queen, “soupet,” is a hapax. The glossary to the edition notes, “soupet, mot douteux; paraît avoir le sens de ‘galant, amant.’” But
it is also important to note that the chronicler is very positive toward Louis and anti-Jean. In a section on all the nobles who died fighting the Turks, the chronicler remarks that it is a pity that Jean had not died fighting the Turks. Why assume that “soupet” means “gallant, amant”? The definition would seem inevitable only to those who already believe that the rumor was circulating. Perhaps the word is a mispelling of the frequently-used “soubgez,” for example, indicating that Isabeau was his political superior.

The history of Georges Chastellain (1430–75), chronicler in the service of the dukes of Burgundy, is another frequently cited example of proof of the rumor’s circulation. Charles VII was despondent, Chastellain imagines, because two princes had ganged up against him and because he had been “delinqui de son pere et desavoué comme bastard” (abandoned by his father and disavowed as a bastard). There is room, however, to question whether this means that Charles VII was disavowed because he was a bastard or that he was merely treated as if he were one: “desavoué comme bastard” might mean either.

Still, the rumor’s circulation cannot be denied, however limited it may have been. The chronicle of Nicole Gilles (d. 1503) reports it in his description of the death of Isabeau:

Ce fut une grant honte aux Angloys qui l’avoient en leurs mains de laisser en cest estat conduyre le corps de ladicte dame, à laquelle par le traité de mariage de sa fille avec le feu Roy ils avoient promis au feu Roy son mari et elle leur entretenir leur estat comme à roy et royne appartenoit. Toutes fois ilz n’en firent riens car ils leur laisserent avoir moult de nècessitez. Et qui plus est disoient à ladicte Royne que ledit Roy Charles son fils estoit illégitime et n’estoit point filz du Roy Charles.

[It was shameful of the English who had her in their care to let the body of the said lady be conducted in such a state, for they had promised to her and her husband in the treaty of marriage of her daughter to the late king to treat them in a manner appropriate to the status of king and queen. Nonetheless, they did not do this for they left them in need. And moreover, they said to the said queen that the said King Charles her son was illegitimate and that he was not the son of King Charles.] As he continues, because of this, “ladicte Dame eut si grant douleur au cuer qu’elle en mourut avant ses jours” (the said lady was so unhappy that she died prematurely). The words are so similar to those of Jean Chartier that Gilles’s source must have been the Chronique de Charles

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VII, roi de France. Still, his mention of it suggests that the rumor was circulating if nowhere else at least among a small group of chroniclers. Using similar words, Robert Gaguin (1434–1501) declares that “d’aucune chose celle royne tant ne fut irritée que quand la Roy d’Angleterre publioit son filz Charles (à present Roy) avoir esté né en concubinage incestueux” (nothing disturbed this queen as much as when the King of England announced her son Charles, the present king, to have been born of an incestuous union).20

Besides mention of the rumor in chronicles, a number of other sources testify to its existence. Future Pope Pius II and prolific writer, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (1405–64), reproduces it in De Viris illustribus of 1449.21 Ten years later in his autobiographical Commentarii he puts the assertion that Charles VII was illegitimate into the mouth of Henry VI, who is addressing Philip the Good just after the murder of Philip’s father, Jean sans Peur, at the hands of the men of Charles VII: “Abusa viri morbo, regina hoc monstrum ex alieno concepit” (Taking advantage of the illness of her husband, the queen conceived this monster outside the marriage).22

A commonly cited example attributes Louis XI, Isabeau’s grandson, with having referred to the queen as a putana. Auguste Brachet gives the source for the citation, quoting an Italian ambassador’s comment that in 1479 Louis referred to Charles VI as un pazo (a crazy person) and his wife una gran putana.23

Historian Antoine Thomas offers evidence that the rumor circulated among villagers as well as among the literate, reporting that in 1457 an old Auvergnat called Jehan Batiffoll, having drunk too much one evening, announced that Charles VII was not the true king, for he did not possess the “royal sign.” Suddenly realizing the trouble his drunken words might cause him, Jehan betook himself to the chancellor and received a royal letter of remission as a precaution. Thomas discovered the story in a record of the letter of remission, kept in the Archives Nationales.24

Discussion of the promiscuity rumor would not be complete without recalling the version of Brantôme, who gives it brief mention in his chapter on Louis XII, king of France and grandson of Louis of Orleans.25 Brantôme wryly contrasts Louis XII with his grandfather, who was a “gallant, et trafiquoit de toute frette, comm’un bon marchand et marinier (gallant, and he trafficked in all types of cargo, like a good merchant and a sailor). Louis spent most of the night he was assassinated with his sister-in-law, Brantôme reports. And although he does not know whether the story is true or false,
he continues, the English king said that Charles VII was the offspring of an adulterous affair. Still, Brantôme is not in general critical of the queen. Later, in a section defending female regency, he remarks simply that Isabeau “eust la regence de son fils, son mary Charles VI, estant alteré de son bon sens, par l’advis de son conseil” (acted as regent for her son, her husband Charles VI, being mentally altered, as recommended by his council).

“Even as France Had Been Lost by a Woman, It Would Be Saved by a Woman”

Finally, related to the promiscuity rumor is another important element of Isabeau’s vilification, the pairing of the debauched queen with the pure maid, Joan of Arc. Collette Beaune writes of the queen that the “imagination populaire l’oppose à la Pucelle. Ce qui avait été perdu par une femme serait sauvé par une femme.” (popular imagination opposed her to the Maid. What had been lost by a woman would be saved by a woman.)

However, an explicit example cannot be tracked down. The Maid herself is said to have stated that France, having been lost through a woman, would be restored by a virgin. The statement is reported in the record of Joan’s Procès en nullité in 1455. Two witnesses, Joan’s uncle, Durandus Laxart of Burey-le-Petit, and Catherine of Vaucouleurs, claim to have heard the Maid make the proclamation. The testimony of Durandus reports that he “ipse eamdem Johannam fuit quesitum ad domum patris, et eam adduxit ad domum sue habitacionis; et ipsa dicebat eidem testi quod volebat ire ad Franciam, versus dalphinum, ad faciendum eundem corone, dicendo: ‘Nonne alias dictum fuit quod Francia per mulierem desolaretur, et postea per virginem restaurari debebat’” (went to seek this same Joan at her father’s house and brought her to his house; she told the witness that she wished to go into France, to the dauphin, to have him crowned, saying, “Was it not formerly said that France should be desolated by a woman, and should be restored by a maid?”). Durandus then took Joan to the home of Catherine in Vaucouleurs, where the young woman lived for about three weeks. While there, Joan spoke to Sieur Robert de Baudricourt, Captain of Vaucouleurs, to try to persuade him to lead her to the dauphin. According to Catherine, “dum ipsa Johanna vidit quod dictus Robertus nolebat eam ducere, dixit ipsa testis quod audivit eidem Johanne Her Afterlife 47
dici quod oportebat quod iret ad dictum locum ubi erat dalphinus, dicendo: ‘Nonne audistis quod prophetizatum fuit quod Francia per mulierem destrueretur, et per unam virginem de marchiis Lotharingie restauraretur?’ Et tunc ipsa testis hec audisses recordata est, et stupefacta fuit.” (when Joan saw that Robert refused to lead her to the king, she said to the witness that it was still necessary for her to go to the dauphin, saying, “Have you not heard that there was a prophecy that France would be destroyed by a woman and saved by a virgin from the Marches of Lorraine?” And then the witness said that she did remember having heard the prophecy and was stupefied.)

But Joan is not said to have associated the prophecy with Isabeau, according to the witnesses at her Procès en nullité, although they would have had nothing to fear from doing so in 1455. It would have been difficult for supporters of Charles VII to accuse Isabeau of adultery, because this would have thrown his right to the throne into doubt. However, there would have been no reason not to blame her for handing the kingdom over to the English with the Treaty of Troyes. For modern readers, slipping the queen into the binary in opposition to the virginal Joan of Arc seems a natural move. As Anatole France writes in his history of Joan of Arc, “Of the two facts foretold [in the prophecy], the first, the evil one, had come to pass in the town of Troyes, when Madame Ysabeau had given the Kingdom of the Lilies and Madame Catherine of France to the King of England. It only remained to hope that the second, the good, would likewise come to pass.”

But was the move self-evident to the fifteenth-century public? If so, no one articulates it. Indeed, it must be emphasized that the prophecy that France, lost by a woman, would be saved by a maid, had no need of Isabeau: it was popular long before the queen was ever accused of losing the kingdom through the Treaty of Troyes. Ultimately based on the Eva/Maria dichotomy, already recorded by Justin Martyr in the second century, the theme was common in poetry of the early fifteenth century, which focused on “the legitimacy of the monarchy, its present deplorable state, the aid to be bestowed upon it by a virgin, and the peace that will result,” as Deborah Fraioli writes. Fraioli offers many examples of individual poems of the early fifteenth century that treat the theme. None of these evoke Isabeau, implicitly or explicitly. Cynthia Brown proposes that some of the illustrations of Alain Chartier’s the Livre de l’espérance visualize the theme by showing the feeble male figures of the work, Entendement and the author, as being first weakened and then empowered by female personifications: they are both ru-
ined and raised again by women. But Isabeau is not associated with the loss of the kingdom in these examples.

Of course, the absence of direct evidence does not prove that the Isabeau/Joan opposition never occurred to anyone or that they were not making it covertly. However, it is hard to make that case in the absence of evidence, especially given that the prophecy circulated well before it could have been associated with Isabeau, that is, before the Treaty of Troyes. In fact, some of the references to the prophecy that have long been assumed to point to Isabeau do not seem relevant to the queen at all. One scholar observes that after the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, “it was a commonplace prophecy that even as France had been lost by a woman, Isabeau de Bavière, it would be saved by a woman. The Sibylla Francica (1429) shows that this prophecy was current even in Germany.” And yet, when one reads the Sibylla Francica, composed by an anonymous German cleric in 1429, the words generally believed to apply to Isabeau are difficult to associate with the queen. We are told that “hoc regnum Franciae ruinam passum est ex superfluitate vitae et abundantia panis, propter unius mulieris speciem” (the kingdom of France underwent ruin from an excess of life and overabundance of bread, because of the beauty [or appearance] of one woman). Would a cleric writing in 1429 ascribe France’s downfall to the vision or beauty (species) of Isabeau of Bavaria? It is possible that the cleric is making a sly reference to the adultery rumor that may have begun to circulate by this point, assuming the queen to have been beautiful in her youth. But the idea that France was ruined by some kind of (jealous?) conflict over the queen does not conform to any other written references to her.

Nothing excludes the possibility that during the fifteenth century Isabeau and Joan of Arc were popularly opposed. And certainly there is no denying the currency of the formula in the modern imagination. However, written evidence of the opposition is relatively recent, more characteristic of modern scholarship like Françoise Barry’s 1964 study of the institution of French queenship than of medieval chronicles or poetry. In contrast to the debauched Isabeau, writes Barry, Joan was “une enfant du peuple, n’ayant comme armes que sa foi et sa pureté” (a child of the people, possessing only her faith and her purity as arms), the savior not only of French unity, but of the French monarchy, as well. For Barry, Isabeau was a vengeful traitor to France, as well as cowardly, divisive, opportunistic, and German. This Isabeau has served from the nineteenth century on as a construct against which to pose French identity. But for the fifteenth century, if the construct existed, it has
left no explicit trace. Certainly the impression left by some modern scholars, that Isabeau was commonly slotted into the prophecy that “even as France had been lost by a woman, it would be saved by a woman” is not supported by the evidence.

Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Developments

The circulation of the rumor of Charles VII’s illegitimacy was thus the first step in Isabeau’s postmortem vilification. However, this particular charge does not figure in the next important phase of the queen’s black legend, result of the work of a variety of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century legal historians who read and redeployed her story to make different points about the fraught issue of female regency. Indeed, the promiscuity strand is absent from this phase of the legend’s development, because scholars writing on female regency depended on chronicles and legal documents, neither of which charge her with adultery. Still, these sources, read from a perspective on law and violence that no longer accepted resorting to arms as a fundamental seigneurial right, permitted significant development of the legend in quite a different direction. For early modern readers already inclined to see women as fickle, the sources presented them with a queen whose primary characteristics seemed to be divisiveness and instability. Some, failing to correct for the Burgunidan bias in the complaints about Louis of Orleans and the queen in Pintoin’s chronicle for 1405, discovered a political incompetent mismanaging the realm. Furthermore, the strong presence of powerful men in the documents—Louis of Orleans and Philip and Jean of Burgundy—prevented legal historians from recognizing the nature of Isabeau’s particular role in the government. Overshadowed by these obstreperous figures, the queen was often overlooked. And yet, it is also important to note that certain legal historians, recognizing the unreliability of chroniclers in general, insisted that the truth lay only in the ordinances, with their lack of adornment.

Thus two distinct Isabeaus emerge from the period, one discreet, the other riotous. To begin with the discreet Isabeau, legal historian Jean du Tillet, greffier at the Parlement of Paris and member of what has been called the historical school of that institution, demonstrates that at least certain writers understood that the material in chronicles must be handled cautiously. Charged with defending the king’s prerogatives, Du Tillet (not to be confused with his younger brother of the same name who was Bishop of Brieux and then of Meaux, and who, like his brother, died in 1570) scoured histor-
ical documents to support his legal recommendations, which were based on customary rather than Roman law.\footnote{38}

An issue of concern for him was determining the age of majority. In the pamphlet “Pour la Majorité du roi treschretien, contre les escrits des rebelles,” Du Tillet argues for majority of the king at the end of the fourteenth year, concluding that the young king, François II, should be permitted to choose his own advisors.\footnote{39} Du Tillet supports his case with ordinances and charts, including the \textit{1374} ordinance of Charles V. In determining what French legal tradition had set as the age of majority, he insists that only trustworthy historical witnesses to \textit{droit coutumier}—charters, in other words—be consulted. He specifically warns against paying heed to chronicles:

\begin{quote}
Ils sont les premiers ignorans qui ont donné foy d’histoire aux annales & chroniques de France: laquelle aient eu tant d’actes dignes de memoire a esté infortunée & privée de suffisans historiens, fors quelques regnes particuliers en trop petit nombre, qui ont eu de personnes proches des princes & manians leurs affaires, qui en ont laissé des commentaires.
\end{quote}

[The most ignorant are those who have taken as history the annals and chronicles of France; this country with so many acts deserving of memory has been unfortunate to have been deprived of sufficient historians, except for the too few particular reigns where people close to the princes and responsible for their affairs have left some commentaries of their period.]\footnote{40}

He continues, “Les escripts mis en lumiere mesmes traictans ce qui est advenu de nos jours, sont pleins de fables & remplis de nouvelles du palais.” (The writings brought to light, even those about events from our own days, are full of fables and filled with gossip.)\footnote{41}

Du Tillet follows his own advice and largely ignores chroniclers. His only reference to the queen derived from a chronicler is one from Jean Chartier; he notes that she was badly treated by the English king, remarking, “Cette royne fut petitement entretenue de l’estat de sa maison par les Anglois, es mains desquels elle estoit, & porta fort patiemment ses afflictions” (This queen was kept in poor estate in her house by the English, in whose hands she was, and bore her afflictions very patiently).\footnote{42}

René Choppin, another legal historian of Du Tillet’s circle born in Anjou in 1537, was a lawyer in the Parlement of Paris. Like Du Tillet, he makes no mention of salacious rumors attached to the queen. What is odd at first blush, however, is that he does not mention Isabeau at all in his discussion of female
regency. About the practice of female regency in general, he explains that it is common, writing, “Or combien que la femme ne soit habile & capable de de jouýr du Domaine Royal, toutesfois il est souvent advenu que la Regence & gouvernement du Royaume a esté deferé aux Roynes, soit par le Roy, soit par le commun consentement & ordonnance des Estats” (Now, although a woman may not be suited to or capable of reigning over the royal domain, it has nonetheless often occurred that the regency and the government of the realm have gone to queens, either by the king, or by the common consent of the Estates General). He then goes on to list several examples of such regents: Adela, wife of Louis VII; Blanche of Castile; Jeanne of Navarre for Philippe IV; and Anne of Brittany for Louis XII. He makes no mention of Isabeau.

The reason for this omission is unclear. Perhaps it is related to the fact that Choppin was working from ordinances. The queens he mentions were unambiguously appointed regents in the case of the deaths of their spouses by royal ordinance, even though some, like Jeanne of Navarre, wife of Philippe IV, never served as such. In contrast, the ordinances relating to Isabeau’s role never clearly assign her the role of regent. Indeed, Charles VI’s most widely cited ordinances regarding regency were those abolishing it altogether, passed first in 1403 and then in 1407. About the latter, Choppin states that

quelques années apres le mesme Roy [Charles VI] ordonna que l’aisné des enfants Roys seroit incontinent sacre & couronné Roy de quelque aage qu’il fuss, & que durant son bas aage la Royne auroit la Regence & administration du Royaume, par lettres patentes du 25 Novembre 1407. Ce qui fut tres bien ordonne.

[a few years later the same king ordered that the eldest of the king’s children would be immediately anointed and crowned king, whatever age he was, and that during his minor years the queen would have regency and administration over the kingdom, by letters patent of November 25, 1407. This was a good order.]

It would have been Isabeau who would have “regence” and “administration du royaume” in this ordinance, a point that goes without mention by Choppin. Perhaps the omission can be explained by the fact that the very purpose of the ordinance is specifically to abolish the regency in the aftermath of the assassination of Louis of Orleans. Given that it was motivated in the first place by fear that one of the heir’s powerful male relatives would seize control, “regency” in this case is a different thing from earlier examples, when
powerful regents had ruled in their own names. Here, Isabeau, incapable of usurping the throne because she was a woman, would look after the kingdom with the help of a council until the king came of age.

In the *Traité de la majorité de nos rois*, Pierre Dupuy (1582–1651) presents a sober and unembellished portrayal of Isabeau, but like Choppin, he does not accord her reign a role in the development of female regency. Dupuy conscientiously reports the royal ordinances relative to regency passed by Charles VI. Like Choppin’s, Dupuy’s account does not focus on Isabeau’s status as regent, drawing attention instead to the fact that the ordinances of 1403 and 1407 abolished the regency altogether. It is through this prism—that the queen was not a genuine regent in the dangerous old sense, but a different creature—that these two ordinances were viewed. Thus they were not considered relevant to the creation of female regency. Isabeau would reign *au nom de son fils*. The unruliness of Louis of Orleans is described in some detail (although the description is not accurate on some counts—for example, he was not given complete authority over the kingdom in 1402 as Dupuy claims, but just the authority to raise taxes north of the Loire), underlining the motivation for the ordinances abolishing the regency.

Other historians, like Bernard de Girard, Seigneur du Haillan (1535–1610), secretary of finances for the Duke of Anjou, incorporate material on the alliance of Louis and Isabeau gleaned from the chronicle of Pintoin but filter it through a misogynistic optic that sees women as inherently unstable and avaricious. He puts Isabeau in the thick of the fight for power, depicting her as vacillating and responsible for the ruin of the realm:

Les affaires de ce jeune Roy & de son regne dés son commencement commencerent à se brouiller, qui font un prognostique d’un piteux regne, comme il fut, car il ne fut jamais que plein de divisions, de cruautez, de massacres, de vengeance, de perfidies, & de toutes desolations causees de l’ambition des grands, de la folie & imbecilite de ce Roy, des divisions des deux maisons d’Orleans & de Bourgogne, & des brouilleries, haines, & discordes semees entre elles par la Roine Elisabeth ou Ysabel de Baviere, femme dudit Roy, qui tantost se mettoit du costé de l’un contre l’autre, puis quittant celuy là, se bandoit contre celuy qu’elle avoit auparavant favorisé, & gouvernant ainsi les fantasies, passions, & humeurs feminines en ce Royaume, le mit à un pied de sa ruine.

[The affairs of this young king and his realm were troubled from the very beginning of his reign, which boded ill for the reign, which was always]
rent with division, cruelty, massacres, vengeance, perfidy, and all sorts of disasters caused by the ambitions of the powerful, and the insanity of the king, the strife between the two houses of Orleans and Burgundy, and the trouble, hatred, and discord sown between them by the queen Elisabeth or Isabeau of Bavaria, wife of the said king, who sometimes took one side against the other, and then leaving one for the other, banded against the one that she had earlier favored, and the fantasies, passions, and feminine humors governing thus in the realm, she brought it to the brink of ruin.]47

Isabeau was “hautaine, superbe, pompeuse, vindicative, & malicieuse” (haughty, condescending, pompous, vindicative, and ruseful) and she “apporta en France le luxe des habillemens, & des pierres, & qui par ses menees, & par sa malice fut cause de plusieurs grands maux en France (brought to France luxury in the form of clothes and jewels, and by her doing and her malice was the cause of many of the great woes of France).48 (Here it is clear that he has been reading Pintoin, 3:268.) According to the Seigneur du Haillan, when Charles first became mad, the Estates General convened to assign the Duchess of Burgundy, another woman who was “superbe & hautaine,” to Isabeau as her first assistant and principal companion. (Here it is clear that he has been reading Froissart, 15:54.) The Duchess of Burgundy was so unyielding regarding anything having to do with the queen of France that no one could speak to Isabeau without her permission.49 Although she despised the Duchess of Burgundy for this stranglehold, Isabeau tolerated her because husband of the duchess, Philip of Burgundy, was the head of the government. As soon as Philip died, Isabeau was free to transfer her allegiance from the House of Burgundy to the House of Orleans. Not only this: “Elle vouloit executer la vengeance si long temps couvee dedans sa test malicieuse (coutume propre aux femmes qui espient le temps & l’occasion de se venger d’une injure longuement dissimulée).” (She wanted to exercise the vengeance that had brewed so long in her malicious head [a custom particular to women, who wait for the time and occasion to avenge themselves of a long-dissimulated injury].)50

As for the regency during the king’s absences, the Seigneur du Haillan writes that earlier authors disagree about who was in charge. A council met to settle the rivalry between the dukes, but as for who took control of the government, disagreement exists, he notes. Some authors say that Isabeau reigned with the princes, while others do not include her in the government.51
The unflattering picture of the vacillating Isabeau that arises from his reading is undoubtedly related to the shift in perspective on the right of the nobility to feud. Between the time of Isabeau and the Seigneur du Haillan, the right to violence had begun to be monopolized and that “monopoly was built on the suppression of the noble feud by central governments in the sixteenth century.” Not that feuding vanished. But for the Seigneur du Haillan it would have been viewed as illegal. He thus reads Isabeau’s activity as participation in internal conflicts in which she had no business involving herself. For the same reason he understands her activity as evidence of her arrogance.

In his chapter of *Franco-Gallia* dealing with why women are prohibited from ruling, François Hotman briefly discusses the case of Isabeau and Charles VI. Given the attitude toward women in power that he demonstrates, one assumes that he would have been happy to excoriate the queen had he possessed the ammunition: just before turning to Isabeau, he denounces the venerable Blanche of Castile, proclaiming that while she may be popular among many, she was in fact such a bully that she terrorized her son, Saint Louis. Hotman says nothing about Isabeau’s early regency work, discussing only the Troyes government of 1417. However, his source being Monstrelet, as he tells us himself, he can find nothing very bad to say about the queen.


[Before the government of the kingdom could be vested by the authority of the council in tried and chosen men, many disputes had been instigated by ambitious men. On six occasions these quarrels flared up, and six times they were settled by agreement. Finally Isabella was driven out of Paris and proceeded to Chartres. There she discovered a crafty fellow]
named Philippe de Morvilliers and set up a parlement for herself with a president and Morvilliers as chancellor. On his advice she ordered a royal seal (commonly called the chancery seal) to be engraved, and upon it to be depicted an image of herself with arms folded in prayer. She used the following preface on official documents: “Isabella by the grace of God Queen of France, who by reason of the King’s ill-health exercises the government of the kingdom.”[54]

Up until this point Hotman’s story is more or less accurate, following Monstrelet. But as he continues, it becomes apparent that he has read something out of order, for as he tells it, Isabeau is sent to Tours after she sets up her parallel government in Troyes. And as he describes the misplaced exile to Tours, his misogyny gets the best of him and he throws in a particularly insulting description of the queen being held by her custodians, a wildly distorted version of Monstrelet, who reports that Isabeau was closely guarded: “Quatuorque illi tutores attributi, qui belluam illam indomitam domi continerent, viderentque ne quam rem agere, ac ne literam quidem ullam sine ipsorum permissu scribere posset.” (Four custodians were appointed to keep that wild beast in her lodgings and to see that she was able to do nothing, not so much as to write a letter without their leave.)[55]

Questions of female regency were especially urgent in the seventeenth century, which saw the controversial reigns of Marie de Médicis for her son, Louis XIII, and Anne of Austria for Louis XIV. Le Sceptre de France en que nouille par les régences des reynes of 1650 by Claude Du Bosc de Montandré betrays the ambivalence with which many regarded the institution. The work is a copy of La Regence des reynes en Frances ou les regentes by Robert Luyt with the difference that the treatise of Du Bosc de Montandré, which includes a preface rendering it highly unflattering to Queen Anne, develops the argument for Salic Law.[56] The result is a conflicted argument. On the one hand, the text states:

Remarque est que les Reynes ont esté ordinairement preferées en ce choix, à tous les Princes du Sang, & aux autres Seigneurs Ecclesiastiques ou seculiers, par cette mesme raison, que l’on ne peut pas craindre qu’elles usurpent la Couronne à la succession de laquelle elles sont incapables par la Loy fondamentale de cette Monarchie; & que d’ailleurs la nature leur donne un droit inviolable à la Tutele de leurs enfans, ou à la conduite de leurs jeunes freres.

[It is to be noted that queens have normally been preferred in this choice...]

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to all the other princes of the blood and to other ecclesiastical or secular lords for the same reason, that is, that there is no fear that they will usurp the crown from the succession for which they are ineligible by the fundamental law (Salic Law) of this Monarchy; and that in addition nature gives them an inviolable right to guardianship over their children, or their young brothers.]57

On the other, it continues:

Mais cette loy qui devoit apporter un remede à tant de desordres dans l’estat François, n’a servy que de sujet pour les augmenter, & en faire naistre de nouveaux, ainsi qu’on peut voir dans tout cêt ouvrage, les factions, les guerres civiles, les divisions, les ravages, les incendies, les pillages, les violemens, les horribles seignées, & la perte de tant de millions d’ames, en ont esté les funestes suittes, qui ne sont que trop connuës de nostre temps.

[But this law that is meant to remedy the problems in the French state has only served to exacerbate them and give birth to new ones, as we can see in this work in the factions, civil wars, division, ravages, fires, pillages, rapes, bloodletting, and the loss of so many millions of souls, which have been the funereal results, which are only too well known during our own times.]58

Isabeau receives no criticism in the section on the development of female regency; rather the focus is on the unruly behavior of the royal uncles and the misery their rivalries caused. However, the rumors about Isabeau’s personal behavior are mentioned when the author contemplates what might have motivated Isabeau to break with her son, Charles VII. Was it the scandal caused by her liaison with Louis Bosredon, Isabeau’s maître d’hôtel, arrested as we saw in chapter one by the Armagnacs in 1416 on the pretext that her court was behaving scandalously? Or was it her hatred of her son’s favorite, the Count of Armagnac?

Il n’est pas aysé de dire quel fut le veritable sujet de la rupture de la Reyne Isabeau avec Charles le Dauphin son fils. Les uns l’attribuent au scandale des amours avec un jeune Seigneur nommé Louis Bourdillon, les autres à une secrette aversion qu’elle ait toujours eue contre Charles . . . Quelques-uns à la bisarrerie de son esprit aussi changeant à aymer ce qu’elle ait un peu auparavant hay, comme il eoit leger à hayr ce qu’elle ait autrefois uniquumenet aymé. D’autres à la hayne ir-
reconciliable du Connestable d’Armagnac, favor de Charles, & ennemy de cette Princesse.

[It is not easy to say what the real reason for the rupture between the queen Isabeau and Charles, the dauphin, her son was. Some attribute it to love scandals with a young lord named Louis Bosredon, some to a secret aversion she had toward Charles. ... Some attribute it to the fickleness of her spirit, which was so changeable that she could love what she had recently hated, and easily hate what she had used to love. Others attributed it to her irreconcilable hatred for the Connétable of Armagnac, favorite of Charles and enemy of this Princess.] 59

It is most frequently in terms of regency that Isabeau is mentioned during these centuries, for she was often present in the histories of the kings of France that began to proliferate in the sixteenth century in response to an increasingly urgent desire to analyze and consolidate the laws associated with the monarchy. However, her regency is not considered key in the development of female regency in these works. Moreover, regarding her through a misogynistic optic, some writers contribute to the queen’s black legend by embellishing the story of her that they found in the chronicles dating from Isabeau’s lifetime and misreading her participation in the Armagnac-Burgundian feud, a conflict they can only view as noxious.

The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The sober strand of history passed on by some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historians of law lost out definitively in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the wildly entertaining stories of an adulterous, luxurious, meddlesome, scheming, and spendthrift queen. These stories were passed on by many historians, including nineteenth-century historians like Michelet, and, in the first years of the twentieth century, Marcel Thibault, who purports to be regarding the evidence surrounding the queen objectively, but nonetheless incorporates her popular image into a larger narrative of French nationalism. The picture of Isabeau transmitted in these histories was reinforced by the school histories circulating widely during the nineteenth century as well as the fiction of Dumas père whose Isabel de Bavière of 1835 portrays the queen at her most scandalous.

Correspondance between Michael Huber, language teacher and translator of Bavarian origins living in Paris in 1764, and the Bayerische Akademie der
Wissenschaften suggests that the black legend of Isabeau had already left the sober vision of the queen in its wake by that time. Referring to Isabeau’s critics, Huber writes: “Meine Heldin wird durch dieselben grausam verschrien, und sie stimmen alle überein, dass Isabelle ein Ungeheuer gewesen ist.” (My heroine is terribly defamed by them, and they all agree that Isabelle was a monster.) Recognizing the authors’ prejudice against the queen, Huber notes that “doch aus den Gründen, die sie anführen, ersieht man ihre Parteilichkeit” (but from the reasons that they give, one can see their bias). Although he intended to write an objective history of the queen, based on the primary sources to which he had access in Paris, he seems to have abandoned the task, for no such history exists.

Unfortunately, we cannot know exactly what was included in the stories circulating about Isabeau that disturbed Huber. A good guess might be that the stories were influenced by Moreau de Mautour’s discovery in 1727 of the charter of the Cour amoureuse of the court of Charles VI. Undoubtedly nourished by the promiscuity tale and the legend of the scheming Isabeau, Moreau de Mautour’s reflections on the poetic “love court” culminate with this: “On sçait qu’un pareil établissement étoit fort du gout de la cour de Charles VI et qu’Isabeau de Bavière, sa femme, qui avoit introduit le luxe et la magnificence, avoit aussi contribué à y introduire la galanterie.” (We know that such an institution was much to the taste of the court of Charles VI and that Isabeau of Bavaria, his wife, who had introduced luxury and magnificence, also contributed to introducing gallantry there.) In a similar vein, Pierre Jean Baptiste Le Grand d’Aussy, editor of Old French fabliaux, opined in the introduction to his edition: “La Court amoureuse fut un des fruits qu’enfanta l’esprit de frivolité répandu par la scandaleuse reine Isabeau. Heureuse au moins la France, si elle n’avoit que ce reproche à lui faire!” (The Cour amoureuse was one of the fruits produced by the spirit of frivolity spread by the scandalous queen Isabeau. France would be lucky if this was the only thing it had to reproach her of!)

But the legend receives a particularly lurid and influential retelling in the best-selling Crimes des Reines de France depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu’à Marie-Antoinette, composed by Louise de Keralio (1758–1822) in 1791. Keralio reads earlier queens as “types” for Marie-Antoinette, and in her rendition, Isabeau’s black legend attains its full expression in a violent attack on the French royalty in general and queens in particular. Isabeau’s story is recounted just after that of Blanche of Castile, whom Keralio dislikes just as much as she does Isabeau, although for different reasons. Blanche
is a hypocritical religious fanatic and domineering mother: “L’esprit de domination ne pouvoit abandonner cette femme qu’avec la vie, et Saint Louis étoit trop bigot and trop soumis pour résister à sa volonté.” (The spirit of domination could leave this woman only with her life itself, and Saint Louis was too much of a bigot and too submissive to resist her wishes.)

Isabeau, taking her place after Blanche, represents evil of another variety. The tenor of the depiction is evident in this introduction to Isabeau’s queenship:

A tant d’horreurs, à celles de la guerre générale qui enveloppoit tous les pays de l’Europe, il manquoit en France la main d’une femme pour augmenter la dissention, et répandre un poison plus subtil dans toutes les ames. Isabeau élevée par les furies pour consommer la ruine de l’état, et le vendre aux ennemis; Isabeau de Bavière parut, et son mariage célébré à Amiens, le 17 juillet 1385, seroit regardé comme l’époque la plus effrayante de nos annales, si le 16 mai 1771, nous n’avions pas vu former des liens plus funestes encore, sous des auspices plus sinistres, présage trop vrai de tous les maux que trainoit avec elle une nouvelle fille d’Achab et de Jésabel.

[Among so many horrors, those of the war in general that enveloped all the countries of Europe, there was missing only the hand of a woman to augment dissension and spread a more subtle poison in souls. Isabeau was raised by the furies to bring about the ruin of the state and to sell it to its enemies; Isabeau of Bavaria appeared, and her marriage, celebrated in Amiens on July 17, 1385, would be regarded as the most horrifying moment in the annals of our history, if on May 16, 1771, we hadn’t seen the formation of a yet more mournful time, under even more sinister auspices, an omen too true of all the woes that a new daughter of Ahab and Jezebel would bring with her.]

Madame de Keralio recounts with horror the fantastic sums spent for Isabeau’s coronation, for her feasts, for her illuminated palaces. According to Keralio, Isabeau’s greed is also the cause of her illegitimate political activity. “La reine étoit, comme Antoinette,” she writes,

violente, avare, incapable de modération dans ses désirs, tourmentée du désir de régner; mais Antoinette n’a pas eu besoin, comme Isabeau, d’embrasser tour-à-tour plusieurs partis différents, et de tenir la balance entre divers chefs, toujours prêts à s’entr’égorger. Les temps ont seuls été la
cause des différences qui se trouvent dans le vie de ces deux femmes; mais dans l’atrocité de leur conduite elle font également frémir d’horreur.”

[The queen was, like Antoinette, violent, greedy, incapable of moderation in her desire, tormented by the desire to reign; but Antoinette didn’t need, like Isabeau, to embrace different parties, to maintain balance between different leaders, all ready to slit each others’ throats. Only the times are responsible for the differences we find in the lives of these two women but in the atrocity of their conduct they arouse shivers of horror in equal measure.]66

Louis of Orleans in this retelling becomes the avatar of the Count of Artois. He enjoys a passionate affair not only with Isabeau, but with Marguerite, Duchess of Burgundy. And Isabeau’s treachery to the nation appears now as a central argument against her. Fully developed for the first time here, it will become a primary reason for the contempt meted out to her by nineteenth-century historians.

This Isabeau/Marie-Antoinette is nuanced by the Marquis de Sade, who, submitting the queen to his ideology of gallantry, gives her rapaciousness a cold and calculating valence, in contrast with the uncontrollable emotionalism described with such gusto by Madame de Keralio. In his account, Isabeau is not the excessive harpy of Keralio’s story, but a woman who carefully manages her greed for maximum gratification. She is, in the words of Sade, an icy “Prototype of Robespierre” characterized by her “libertine coldness.”

Sade’s story, although completed in September 1813, was not published until 1953, and therefore it could not have influenced nineteenth-century historians to any great degree.67 But interesting for modern readers, he admits to being perfectly aware that the charges against the queen are without ground. One can imagine his winking as he admits in the introduction to his book that no mention of the queen’s shocking behavior can be found in contemporary chronicles. Instead, he scolds fifteenth-century chroniclers for failing to report the story of the adulterous queen, a story Sade claims to have found in two “confessions” formerly held in Dijon, subsequently (and conveniently) destroyed by Revolutionaries. But the truths (vérités) contained within these confessions are so obvious, the Marquis continues, that “[elles] n’avaient même pas besoin pour convaincre des preuves que nous fournissons” ([they] do not even require the proof that we provide).
chroniclers, he reproaches them: “Faute d’être guidé par vous, il faut que le malheureux lecteur fasse les plus grands efforts pour démêler les vérités que vous n’avez pas le courage de lui dire.” (Unguided by you, the poor reader must make a great effort to unravel the truths that you did not have the courage to tell him.)

The works of Madame de Keralio and the Marquis de Sade of course functioned as critiques against the royalty of the late eighteenth century, and in an allegorical sense they undoubtedly had merit. These were works of rhetoric, not histories, and they had no interest in considering the circumstances that produced the monarchical system within which Isabeau existed. Jules Michelet, too, incorporated the story of Isabeau into his history of France for rhetorical purposes, admitting that the story of a liaison between the queen and her brother-in-law had no historical basis. In the nineteen-volume Histoire de France, published for the first time in 1867, Isabeau is not an individual, but a figure for the woes of France, the prize in a struggle for power. Analyzing historical personages as embodiments of historical tendencies, Michelet depicts the Armagnac-Burgundian feud as a sort of contagion. What originates as a personal struggle between two destructive personality traits, pride and desire, embodied in Charles VI, finishes by spreading like a disease to an ever-expanding group. First the dukes are affected and finally their factions. Michelet writes of Charles VI:

Il y a dans la personne humaine deux personnes, deux ennemis qui guer- roient à nos dépens, jusqu’à ce que la mort y mette ordre. Ces deux enne- mis, l’orgueil et le désir, nous les avons vus aux prises dans cette pauvre âme de roi. L’un a prévalu d’abord, puis l’autre; puis, dans ce long com- bat, cette âme s’est éclipsée, et il n’y a plus eu où combattre. La guerre finie dans le roi, elle éclate dans le royaume; les deux principes vont agir en deux hommes et deux factions, jusqu’à ce que cette guerre ait produit son acte frénétique: le meurtre; jusqu’à ce que, les deux homes ayant été tués l’un par l’autre, les deux factions, pour se tuer, s’accordent à tuer la France.

[In the human being, there are two people, two enemies warring to our detriment, until death restores order. These two enemies, pride and de- sire, can be seen at war in that poor soul of the king. Initially one takes the upper hand, then, the other; then, in the midst of the long combat, the soul is eclipsed, and there is no place left to fight. Finished within the king, the war erupted in the kingdom; the two principles were then rep-
resented by two men and two factions, until the war produced its most frenetic act: murder; until the two men, having been killed by each other, agreed to kill France.]69

“Cela dit, au fond tout est dit” (That said, everything is said), Michelet concludes.

The vice of pride spread to Jean sans Peur, while desire took root in Louis of Orleans. But as far as Michelet is concerned, this desire was not a negative trait. On the contrary, France loved the cupidinous Louis, because she saw herself in him:

Pour la première fois, au sortir du roide et gothique Moyen Age, elle se vit ce qu’elle est, mobilité, elegance légère.... Elle aimait cette jolie tête qui tournait celle des femmes; elle aimait cet esprit hardi qui déconcertait les docteurs: c’était plaisir de voir les vieilles barbes de l’Université, au milieu de leurs lourdes harangues, se troubler à ses vives saillies et balbutier.... L’Eglise était faible pour cet aimable prince; elle lui passait bien des choses; il n’y avait pas moyen d’être sévère avec cet enfant gâté de la nature et de la grace.

[For the first time, emerging from the rigid and gothic Middle Ages, she saw herself for what she was: mobility, light elegance, childlike fantasy. She loved this pretty head that turned those of women; she loved the hardy intelligence that disconcerted the doctors: it was a pleasure to see the old beards of the university, in the midst of their heavy harangues, bothered and speechless from his pointed sallies.... The Church had a soft spot for this amiable prince; she allowed him many things; one could not be severe with this child spoiled by nature and grace.]70

The object of Louis’ most ardent desire is Isabeau, queen, his brother’s wife, figure for the kingdom. Did the real Louis become the real Isabeau’s lover, Michelet wonders? There is no evidence of it, he admits. Still, the idea “n’est pas improbable. Ce qui est sûr, c’est qu’il semblait fort uni avec Isabeau au conseil et dans les affaires; une si étroite alliance d’un jeune homme trop gallant avec une jeune femme qui se trouvait comme veuve du vivant de son mari, n’était rien moins qu’édifiante.” (is not improbable. What is sure is that is he seemed strongly allied with Isabeau on the council and in business of the realm; such a firm alliance between a too gallant young man and a young woman who happened to be the widow of a living husband speaks for
itself.)\textsuperscript{71} He concludes, “Maître de la reine, il semblait vouloir l’être du royaume” (Master of the queen, he seemed to want to be of the realm).\textsuperscript{72} It is quite simply irrelevant for Michelet whether Louis and Isabeau were lovers in reality, because his entire reading of their lives is allegorical. They do not represent human beings, but the “spirit” of their times.

However, a problem arose when works like those of Madame de Keralio and Michelet were read as indictments of the historical Isabeau rather than as indictments of the entire system of royalty or as commentaries on the spirit of Isabeau’s time. Many historians passed on the story of the debauched Isabeau to French schoolchildren; only a few can be mentioned here. Perhaps the most influential was Michelet’s teacher, François Guizot (1787–1874), whose highly popular history of France, \textit{L’Histoire de France depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’en 1789 racontée à mes petits-enfants}, which came out a few years after Michelet’s own history, exemplifies the damage wrought by literal readings of works that were never intended as histories. Like his pupil, Guizot develops the story of Isabeau’s amorous life but for different reasons. In his story, Louis is charming and frivolous, accomplice of the queen, who wields a good deal of influence with the king. Different from Michelet’s version, this is a genuine criticism of a certain type of morality.

Entre la reine Isabeau de Bavière et le duc d’Orléans, frère du roi, une intimité s’établit qui, dans la ville et parmi les honnêtes gens, choquait les moins sévères; sans doute par l’influence de la reine, Charles VI se décida brusquement, en 1402, à remettre au duc d’Orléans l’entier gouvernement du royaume et le droit de le suppléer en tout durant les accès de sa maladie. . . . [Le duc d’Orléans] était élégant, affable, léger, facile; il avait pour partisans, à la cour, tous ceux qui partageaient ses goûts et ses moeurs plus que frivoles, et son jugement politique ne valait pas mieux que ses moeurs; dès qu’il fut investi du pouvoir, il en abusa étrangement; il ordonna sur le clergé comme sur le peuple, la levée d’une taille énorme, et l’usage qu’il faisait de l’argent agrawait encore la colère publique.  

[Between the queen Isabeau of Bavaria and the Duke of Orleans, brother of the king, an intimacy grew up, which, in the city and among decent people shocked the least severe; undoubtedly, by the influence of the queen, Charles VI decided suddenly to hand over the entire government of the realm to the Duke of Orleans and the right to replace him during his periods of illness. . . . [The Duke of Orleans] was elegant, affable, light, easy; his partisans at court were all those who shared his tastes and
frivolous values, and his political judgment was worth no more than his morals; as soon as he was invested with power, he abused it bizarrely; he levied an enormous tax upon the clergy and the people, and the use he made of this money aggravated public anger even more.

The queen’s salacious activity, according to Guizot’s account, did not come to an end with the assassination of Louis. Guizot reports the story of Louis Bosredon:

Elle menait d’ailleurs à Vincennes une vie scandaleusement licencieuse; un de ses favoris, Louis de Bosredon, gentilhomme d’Auvergne et son maître d’hôtel, rencontrant Charles VI un jour sur la route, le salua légèrement et poursuivit en hâte son chemin. Charles VI en parut choqué. Le comte d’Armagnac saisit l’occasion; non-seulement il fomenta l’humeur du roi, mais il entretenit la rumeur de tous les désordres qui se passaient autour de la reine, et dont Louis de Bosredon était, disait-on, en ce moment, le principal complice.

[In addition, she led a scandalously licentious life at Vincennes; one of her favorites, Louis de Bosredon, gentleman from Auvergne and her maître d’hôtel, meeting Charles VI one day on the road, saluted him casually and stuck to his path. Charles VI seemed to be shocked. The Count of Armagnac seized the occasion; not only did he foment the bad humor of the king, but he fuelled rumors of the all the disorders surrounding the queen, and in which Louis de Bosredon was, so it was said, the principal accomplice at the moment.]

Henri Martin’s *Histoire de France populaire depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à nos jours*, published in the same year as Michelet’s history, accepts the same series of metaphors as literal truths. He writes that Isabeau “n’avait de goût que pour les futilités et pour la bonne chère, et mettait sa gloire à donner l’exemple des modes les plus extravagantes” (The queen had a taste for nothing except futilities and frivolities and made her name by setting an example for the most extravagant fashions). Moreover, the queen submitted herself entirely to the will of the Duke of Orleans, whom rumor accused of an incestuous liaison, and by whom it was said that the queen and her husband were bewitched. Martin, however, dismisses these accusations of magic; Louis’s handsome face and beautiful language were sufficient to explain his influence over the women of this dissolute court.

In Martin, the Treaty of Troyes story is formulated according to a line
that has become traditional, that Isabeau sold the kingdom for cash. “Comme cela s’était fait au nom du dauphin Charles, Isabeau, qui aimait son argent plus que toute chose, prit son fils en haine et ne lui pardonna point.” (As it was being done in the name of the dauphin Charles, Isabeau, who loved her money more than anything, decided that she hated her son and would not pardon him.) He also notes contemptuously that in disinheriting Charles, she revoked “la loi qui interdisait aux femmes de succéder à la couronne de France” (the law that prohibited women from succeeding to the crown of France). This is of course was not true; Salic Law was not yet definitive in 1420, although it was observed from time to time that women in France did not inherit the throne. Moreover, Henry V was named Charles VI’s heir by adoption. Catherine, daughter of Charles VI and Isabeau, was married to Henry, but there was never any question of her ruling.

The work of academic Alfred Coville (1860–1942), historian trained at the Ecoles des Chartes and agrégé in history at the Sorbonne, is regarded as scholarly as opposed to the more popular histories I have just described. Yet despite his extensive, at the time groundbreaking, and still influential research on such important topics as the Cabochian revolt, his assessment of Isabeau is indistinguishable from those of popular historians. His misapprehensions, which arise quite clearly from his too literal readings of Pintoin, were undoubtedly colored by popular imaginative accounts of the queen. “Que penser et que croire?” he ponders.

Au fond, c’était un esprit léger, aimant le luxe, la parure et les plaisirs; elle n’était point faite pour soigner un malade; elle aimait ses enfants, les gardait auprès d’elle, à Saint-Pol, à l’hôtel Barbette, à Vincennes, etc., mais oubliait trop souvent de leur donner les soins et les caresses d’une mère, même de les voir. [What to think and what to believe? At heart, she was a lightweight, loving luxury, jewels, and pleasure; she was not made to care for a sick man; she loved her children, keeping them next to her, at Saint-Pol, the Hôtel Barbette, at Vincennes, etc., but she forgot too often to give them the care and caresses of a mother, even to see them.]

Coville’s great obsession regarding the queen was her cupidity, a complaint that continues to influence recent French references to the queen. Failing to take into account the pervasiveness of the literary genre that complains of the court as a place of wastefulness and, more seriously, singling Isabeau out for a type of criticism that could be applied to virtually everyone associ-
ated with the court until the end of the ancien régime, Coville invented a woman who taxed her people without mercy to keep herself in jewels.

Elle tourmentait sans cesse le roi et les gouverneurs des finances de ses demandes et de ses besoins. . . A tout instant elle envoie presser les receveurs des aides qui, par tout le royaume, doivent lui fournir ces sommes. Et tout cela pour faire vivre un hôtel somptueux, pour acquitter les dettes de son frère le duc Louis de Bavière, pour payer des ménestrelles du pays d’Espagne, pour entretenir des animaux de toutes sortes, tourterelles, cygnes, léopards, singes, etc., pour inaugurer des modes nouvelles.

[She ceaselessly tormented the king and governors of the finances with her demands and needs. . . Each second she harassed her tax collectors, who, throughout the realm, had to furnish her sums. And all of that to keep up a sumptuous household, to pay off the debts of her brother Louis of Bavaria, to pay minstrels from Spain, for the upkeep of exotic animals of all sorts, turtle doves, swans, leopards, monkeys, etc., to start new fashions.]\(^80\)

As for the adulterous liaison with Louis of Orleans, Coville is undecided. But, he notes, the most serious argument in its favor is the passage about the queen and Louis in the allegorical justification of the assassination of Louis in the work referred to above, the *Pastoralet*.\(^81\) Coville, like many, mistakes the allegorical level of a story for the truth, assuming that the liaison between a shepherd and shepherdess recounted on the allegorical level of the *Pastoralet* can be read as factual. He also takes up the complaint that Isabeau failed in her duty to prevent the Armagnac-Burgundian war. She was simply too partial to the Duke of Orleans. As evidence he cites the fact that she signed treaties at different times with different parties. Lacking the frameworks developed over recent decades for comprehending how violence was maintained and contained in medieval Europe, Coville was unable to see anything in Isabeau’s actions but feminine fickleness. Unfortunately, this view prevails even now that the viciousness and tenacity of the feud between Orleanists (later the Armangnacs) and the Burgundians can be shown to be typical according to modern theories on violence.

Whereas Michelet stressed the festive and brilliant aspect of the court, inserting Isabeau, not entirely disapprovingly, into a narrative of extravagant living, Marcel Thibault’s *Isabeau de Bavière: Reine de France* of 1903 excoriates the queen’s extravagance along with her inability to keep her husband...
on the straight and narrow path. Although Thibault’s narrative was written in the first years of the twentieth century, I will discuss it as the culmination of the legend’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century development. It must be acknowledged that Thibault’s work is invaluable for the rich assortment of documentary evidence it brings to bear on the queen’s biography. However, his analyses are marred by his assumptions about women, the popular image of Isabeau, and anti-German sentiment. He claims that his narrative is objective, positioning himself in opposition to “les récits fantaisistes de conteurs ou de romanciers qui ne citent point leurs sources, et pour cause” (the fantastical narratives of storytellers and romance writers who do not cite their sources with good reason). He then goes on to reproduce many aspects of the queen’s black legend. We find in Thibault’s account the extravagant queen seeking thrills and selfishly failing to keep a tight rein on Charles:

Elle ne tente rien pour arrêter Charles VI, entraîné sur la pente fatale des plaisirs. Quand elle n’accomplit pas quelque pèlerinage, ou que ses couches ne la contraignent pas au repos, elle vit comme dans un tourbillon d’amusements folâtres, de splendides réjouissances. Et, pendant que le Roi gaspille ses forces, compromet sa dignité, se gâte l’intelligence, elle-même s’expose, par des fatigues immodérées, à ne donner au Royaume que des enfants chétifs.

[She did not try to stop Charles VI, engaged in a downward spiral of pleasures. When she was not off on some pilgrimage, or confined to bed because of childbearing, she lived in a whirlwind of insane amusements and splendid celebrations. And while the king wasted his strength, compromised his dignity, ruined his intelligence, she, because of her immoderate lifestyle, produced for the kingdom only sickly babies.]82

Pintoin and Froissart let us think that Isabeau was passive, asserts Thibault. But this was not the case; in fact, she was harboring a great ambition: to enrich herself.83 Not surprisingly, in Thibault’s version, Isabeau has no concern for the financial woes of the kingdom.

Isabeau semble n’avoir usé de son autorité dans les questions de finances que pour faire aboutir certaines combinaisons profitables aux siens et à elle-même. Insouciante des vrais intérêts du Royaume, incapable de prendre l’initiative des réformes urgentes, non seulement elle ne fit rien pour enrayer les dépenses excessives, mais elle dilapida les revenus des impôts.

[Isabeau seems to have used her authority in the area of finance only to
bring about certain schemes profitable to her family and her friends. In-
different to the real interests of the kingdom, incapable of taking the
initiative in urgent reforms, not only did she do nothing to rein in ex-
cessives spending, but she wasted tax revenues.[84]

Besides her greed, her lack of political acumen is her most striking qual-
ity in Thibault’s account. He characterizes her as only vaguely aware of the
threat to the throne posed by the king’s relatives. In reference to her mediation
of 1401 he wonders, “Est-ce qu’elle sentait confusément que la couronne
de France était menacée? Quel que soit le motif qui la guida, elle maintint la
balance égale entre les deux ducs, et, résultat inattendu, sa tactique se trouva
servir surtout ses propres intérêts.” (Did she confusedly sense that the crown
of France was under threat? Whatever the motive that guided her, she main-
tained a balance between the dukes, and, unexpected result, her tactic turned
out to serve her own interests.)[85] And yet despite the lack of political skill
that Thibault attributes to the queen, he sees her power as vast. Regarding
the royal ordinance of April 24, 1403, he writes that “des lettres royales con-
féraient à Isabeau l’autorité suprême” (some royal letters conferred supreme
authority upon Isabeau).[86]

As for the adultery rumor, Thibault believes in it, citing, like Coville, the
Pastoralet as evidence.[87] In this area she is motivated not only by her sensu-
ality, however, but by her lust for power, using sex as a political weapon. It
is not unlikely, he writes, “qu’Isabeau, dégagée de tous scrupules conjugaux,
et Louis, à qui aucune conquête ne paraissait impossible, aient pensé, chacun
de son côté et en même temps, à se rendre maître de son antagoniste par la
séduction” (that Isabeau free of any conjugal scruples, and Louis, to whom
no conquest seemed impossible, might have decided, each on his own side
and at the same time, to master his enemy through seduction).[88] And in what
seems like an act of historical bad faith, after he has insisted that his narra-
tive will be based only on contemporary documents, Thibault announces
that “si l’on croit certains témoignages de contemporains, la Reine aurait
aimé le duc d’Orléans” (if we believed certain contemporary witnesses, the
queen loved the Duke of Orleans).[89] But he fails to cite any of these wit-
nesses. Not that he could; none existed.

But perhaps most interesting is the vehemence with which Thibault de-
nounces Isabeau’s sympathy for the Germans. He describes the queen as a
sort of collaborator, to the detriment of her adopted country, but capable of
concealing her true agenda: “toutes ses aptitudes à l’intrigue, toute l’activité
dont elle était capable, toute son influence, encore occulte alors, furent mises au service de la Maison de Bavière dont elle rêvait de restaurer la grandeur” (all of her aptitude for intrigue, all of the activity of which she was capable, all of her influence, still hidden at that time, was put to the service of the House of Bavaria, whose grandeur she dreamed of restoring). Thibault employs the language of conspiracy to bolster his claims; although the queen never became fully French, she was capable of dissimulation, which she assumed to her advantage: “elle s’était assimilé tous les dehors, toutes les apparences qui convenaient à son rôle sur la scène française; mais au fond, elle restait allemande” (she assimilated outwardly, taking on the appearance appropriate to her role on the French scene; but at heart, she remained German). The emphasis on the queen’s lack of transparency recalls the rhetoric of the denunciations of Marie-Antoinette. This German-speaking queen was similarly accused of a treachery that she concealed behind an impenetrable surface. Isabeau’s opaqueness, he continues, explains the dearth of references to her among contemporary chroniclers. They simply could not pierce the barrier created by her foreignness, and thus they remained silent about her. According to Thibault, “leur observation ne pouvait pas facilement démêler les goûts et les sentiments de cette étrangère” (their observation could not easily untangle the tastes and feelings of this foreigner).

Conclusion

Defenses of Isabeau exist. I have already mentioned Paul Bonenfant’s balanced assessment of the queen and Heidrunn Kimm’s 1969 monograph exonerating the queen of the debaucheries attributed her, but which, written in German, seems to have been little read by French- and English-speaking historians until recent years. Other scholars, whom I mentioned in the introduction, have since contributed to establishing the truth about the queen. And yet, as the citation with which I began this chapter verifies, the black legend lives on despite scholarly revisions. Even histories that do not mention the adultery rumor often perpetuate the notion of Isabeau as unusually avaricious. For example, an important and well-regarded history of the murder of Jean sans Peur decries Isabeau’s cupidity, turning the queen into another Marie-Antoinette with her penchant for playing the shepherdess:

La reine ne limitait malheureusement pas le luxe à ces objets de piété. Elle aimait les coûteuses réjouissances et les joyeux divertissements. Elle

[Unfortunately the queen did not limit luxury to pious objects. She loved expensive pleasures and joyful amusements. She spent a good deal of money on her residences. She owned in Paris, as of 1398, the Hôtel Barbette, where she lived occasionally. Little by little she had acquired at Saint-Ouen and at Clichy [which together formed] a huge rural property where for her “relaxation and pleasure” she had “some work done and raised animals and birds.”]93

The influence of Keralio’s typology is visible here in the mention of the pleasure farm, which recalls the criticisms aimed at Marie-Antoinette for playing shepherdess. But the judgement overall is based on a failure to recognize the ubiquity of complaints about royal spending and, consequently, seeing Isabeau as particularly wasteful, cannot be justified. The perpetuation of the black legend of Isabeau in this particular scholarly monograph might be seen as a throwaway in that it does not detract significantly from the value of the work as a whole. Still, such uncritical references have prevented Isabeau’s career from being taken seriously and attracting the scholarly attention it merits. One could draw up a long list of such dismissals of the queen in recent histories of the period. Despite its general availability, research revising misconceptions of the queen has been largely ignored to date.

In popular histories, a similar pattern is observable. A small number of popular historians focusing directly on Isabeau have worked to correct her black legend. Two recent examples treating the queen sympathetically, those of Marie-Véronique Clin and Philippe Delorme, have been published in French. And yet, the wild tale of Isabeau is common in the work of such writers as Barbara Tuchman. Undoubtedly the story is amusing, consistent with the pleasantly scandalized opinion of court life common among modern readers interested in European monarchies. Tuchman’s version of Isabeau incorporates the imagery of the foreign Other with the excessive luxury typical of historical fiction of court life:

Frivolous and sensuous, still an alien with a thick German accent, humiliated by her husband’s mad aversion, Isabeau abandoned Charles to his valets. . . . The Queen herself turned to frantic pleasures and to adultery.
combined with political intrigue and a passionate pursuit of money. Insecure in France, she devoted herself to amassing a personal fortune and promoting the enrichment and interests of her Bavarian family. . . . Her sway at court grew ever more extravagant and hectic, the ladies’ dresses more low-necked, the amours scandalous, the festivities more extreme. The story as presented is an irresistible piece of scandal. And yet, one wonders why a recounting closer to the truth of Isabeau’s life would not be interesting, as well.

I began this chapter by suggesting that the persistence of Isabeau’s black legend can be attributed to her status as lieu de mémoire. Over the years, the queen has been transformed into a figure peculiarly well-suited to play the Other against which French nationalism erected itself. As the treacherous, dissipated, fleshly, and fleshy counterpart of the patriotic, chaste, spiritual, and sprite-like Joan of Arc, she has stood for everything that is not French. Promoted in the histories of schoolchildren, her legend became part of a narrative of nationalism which children imbibed at an early age and absorbed unreflectively into their collective memory. As the negative binary of Joan, the image of the lascivious Isabeau has never required supporting evidence. Of course, the queen has not been the victim of nationalism alone. She has been vilified within Christine de Pizan studies, for different reasons. Ironically, Christine herself is responsible to some extent. As we will see in chapter six, the poet foregrounds Isabeau’s in-between position, promoting her as a mediator queen, above the narrow political interests of the ducal factions. In other words, Christine draws up the proper categories for understanding the players vying for a political primacy that she argues should be awarded to nonthreatening regents who will preserve the king’s power rather than usurping it. But as I will demonstrate, Christine’s depictions of Isabeau are not intended to criticize her inactivity, rather to rally support behind an iconically powerful figure.

With powerful women of the Middle Ages and early modern periods increasingly accorded scholarly attention, it is time to restore Isabeau of Bavaria to her proper place in the history of the reign of Charles VI. In what follows, I hope to offer possible avenues for further study of the life and career of this understudied queen.