



King Henry III.  
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## Henry III (1551-1589)

by Michael D. Sibalis

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The last French king of the Valois dynasty, Henry III was widely accused of sodomitical relations with his "minions," but such charges probably say more about the viciousness of the political and religious controversies of sixteenth-century France than they do about Henry III.

Christened Alexandre-Édouard soon after his birth on September 19, 1551, he took the name Henry only in 1564. He was the fourth son of Henry II (1519-1559, reigned 1547-1559) and Catherine de Medici (1519-1589).

Henry was successively Duke of Angoulême (1551-1560), Duke of Orléans (1560-1566), and Duke of Anjou (1566-1574), before being elected King of Poland in May, 1573. He spent only six months in Poland before the death of his brother Charles IX (1550-1574, reigned 1560-1574) on May 30, 1574 made him King of France.

Henry had the misfortune to reign over a France plunged since 1562 into religious warfare between its Protestant minority and an intolerant Catholic majority. The struggle between the competing religions threatened the prestige, stability, and authority of the French monarchy.

Henry III was a hard-working administrator and proponent of a centralized monarchical state at a time when France's great nobles still claimed considerable local authority. He was a loving and devoted husband (he married Louise of Lorraine in 1575) in a generally libertine age; a refined and cultivated Renaissance prince (much influenced in this respect by his Italian mother) in a crude and brutal society; and, above all (and despite his intense personal Catholic piety), a pragmatist willing to come to terms with his Protestant subjects on condition that they accept his political authority.

Not surprisingly, Henry III faced considerable opposition, and scurrilous pamphlets denounced him for tyranny, heresy, and sexual depravity. Many of Henry's contemporaries expressed disgust with his personal conduct, especially his love of jewelry, his occasional transvestism (in the context of masked court balls), and particularly his marked affection for his so-called "minions," a loyal band of youthful courtiers rumored to be his lovers. (The term "minion" actually meant nothing more than "favorite" and had no sexual implications.)

Many homophobic historians would later interpret Henry's alleged effeminacy and homosexuality as symptomatic of monarchical decadence. But the only evidence for Henry's homosexuality is court gossip and polemical attacks by the king's critics, at first his Protestant enemies, then the fanatical Catholic League, which demanded that Henry take a harder line against Protestantism, as well as nobles from France's great houses, who resented the influence of favorites from lesser families.

Sodomy was never the only accusation levelled against the king. As David Teasley has shown, contemporary propaganda "associated [the king's reputed sodomy] with a host of other sins: irreligion, atheism, sorcery, treason, rape, tyranny, monstrous animalistic behaviour, and the killing of children."

Few historians today believe that Henry III was a sodomite. Moreover, a recent study of the king's minions by Nicolas Le Roux argues: "It is less the supposed or real sexual practices of the king and those close to him that interests the historian than the image of illegitimacy conveyed by the discussion of sex."

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sodomy was "the privileged metaphor for social disorder" and-- in this case--charges of sodomy should probably be seen as no more than an indication that many people viewed the king's political and religious policies to be subversive of the natural order.

Jacques Clément, a Dominican monk convinced that he was doing God's work, assassinated Henry III on August 1, 1589. His Protestant cousin, Henry of Navarre, succeeded him as Henry IV (1553-1610, reigned 1589-1610), but managed to impose his rule only after a long civil war and conversion to Catholicism.

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