

The Problem of Tyrannicide in the Monarchomach and Leaguer Political Discourse During the Reigns of Charles IX (1560-1574) and Henry III (1574-1589)

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Abstract

The French Wars of Religion saw the problem of tyranny and the ways to address it take the center stage in French political thought: until this period, it could have remained a subject of abstract speculation, but that was no longer the case in the tumultuous years between 1562 and 1598. Confronted with a hostile central government, both the Huguenots and the Catholic League were forced to think of concrete steps to be taken in order to remove an unsuitable (“tyrannical”) king and of a way to justify and legitimize such a radical measure. For this purpose, the Huguenots and the Catholic League removed the ultimate sovereignty in a kingdom from the person of the king to the people as represented by its magistrates and assemblies, who could depose an incorrigible tyrant. Yet, there was a final and decisive action someone could take in order to be rid of a tyrant, namely, slaying him, but, in this, the positions of the Huguenots and of the Catholic League diverged: the former rejected this option, the latter accepted it. This paper aims to analyze the manifestations of the concept of tyrannicide in the ideology of resistance devised by the Huguenots and Catholics during the reigns of Charles IX (1560-1574) and Henry III (1574-1589), while trying to answer why the latter were willing to accept an action which was so antithetical to the sacredness surrounding kings in sixteenth-century France and to their own Catholic faith.

Keywords: tyranny, tyrannicide, french wars of religion, Huguenots, Catholic League

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1. Introduction

While often a subject of theoretical discussion in medieval political thought, the question of resistance to tyrants and of tyrannicide became acute in the sixteenth century with the advent of the Reformation, when the Reformers were confronted with Catholic monarchs determined to repress the new faith. Tyranny manifested through unjust acts which injured only the material interests of the subjects was one thing, and in such a case the Reformers may have limited themselves to Luther's first recommendations, prayer or flight. But tyranny directed against the faith was a different matter altogether: it was something for which the Protestants were very much prepared to countenance the possibility of rebellion. Consequently, Luther acknowledged that active resistance was permitted if the laws of the Empire allowed it. Then, there was the declaration of the magistrates of the city of Magdeburg, who took up arms against emperor Charles V in 1550, which became the standard reference of Protestant theories of resistance. The ascent of Mary Tudor in England and the persecution she unleashed led to a wave of exiles, who produced the first polemical tracts advocating resistance against persecuting tyrants: John Ponet, in particular, seemed to go even as far as admitting the possibility of tyrannicide by private individuals.

In France, Calvin and his adherents tried to operate within the limits of the law and, in their opinion, resistance against a legitimate king could be carried out only by the lawful magistrates of the kingdom and only in accordance with their authority. For the French Protestants, the most important magistrates, and the ones most authorized to resist tyrannical abuses, were the princes of the blood: for this purpose, Calvin and other Protestant pastors carried out an intense propaganda campaign trying to persuade the first of these, Antoine de Bourbon, king of Navarre, to lead such an action. But the Protestants had misjudged Antoine's devotion for their cause and all their attempts to win him over came to naught. It is in the context of the frustration caused by Antoine's refusal to join the side of the Reformation that Theodore Beza made an allusion to tyrannicide, as the possibility of a lawful action led by the king of Navarre seemed remote (Jouanna 1989, 131). Yet, this remained

an extremely isolated case: even after the first war of religion broke out in the spring of 1562, with a Huguenot rebellion led by the prince of Condé, there was no talk of even resisting the king, let alone of the possibility of killing him.

During the first decade of the religious wars, the Huguenots tried to portray their rebellions in loyalist terms, directed not against the king himself, but against a coterie of evil advisers, who were both persecuting the Protestants and despoiling the kingdom, while usurping royal authority: at least, this was the official line as presented in the propagandistic texts issued by Condé himself. That does not mean that, during this period, there had not been any texts advocating resistance to tyrannical kings: such texts were written, but they were far from the mainstream of Protestant political thought, sometimes, in case of the most embarrassing ones, openly disavowed by the Huguenot leadership. However, there was a gradual radicalization of the Huguenots' relationship with the Crown of France, over the first three wars of religion, and this was reflected in some political texts of lesser importance, coming from the lower ranking members of the movement, and who argued for resistance against tyrannical kings. Even though the Huguenot leadership still stuck with the conventional argument – that they were not actually fighting against the king –, it could be argued that these texts prepared the groundwork for the “monarchomach” texts published after Saint-Bartholomew.

2. The Hesitations of the Huguenot Monarchomachs: 1573-1579

The role of Saint-Bartholomew's massacre in the development of the monarchomach literature has been amply debated: it seems to us, although one can see traces of the same kind of argumentation in tracts published before 1572, that the massacre made the notion of actively resisting a tyrannical king, and even deposing him, acceptable to most Huguenots. Their resistance theory was based on the idea of placing the ultimate sovereignty within the people, who could exert it against an errant king through its individual magistrates or through representative assemblies such as the Estates General.

All three of the so-called “monarchomach triumvirs”, François Hotman, Theodore Beza and Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, were in agreement over this issue, although they might differ in some details, like the exact procedures for the deposition of kings or the exact importance attributed to the magistrates and to the representative assemblies in their constitutional models. But, if deposition of tyrants was taken into consideration and accepted, based on the reasoning that Christian monarchies, and in particular that of France, were fundamentally contractual and the people retained a right to withdraw its allegiance if a king broke the conditions of his ascension, on the other hand, tyrannicide was still frowned upon. Despite this, there are some hints in the monarchomach works that they were tentatively considering this possibility, although it never came to open endorsement.

In his work *Francogallia*, François Hotman argues, based on the alleged custom from the Merovingian and Carolingian periods, that “the kings of France were established by the consent and the will of the people, rather than by hereditary right”; consequently, the same people had “full power and sovereign authority (*souveraine autorité*) to depose them” (Hotman 1574, 59-67). In most of the examples provided by Hotman, this authority of the people manifested itself through stripping the king of his office, even exiling or imprisoning him; there is a single case of so-called “tyrannicide” mentioned by Hotman, that of Childeric II from the seventh century. Hotman provides no definitive judgment in this case: on one hand, he clearly implies that Childeric had deserved his fate for becoming “insolent, proud and presumptuous”; on the other hand, the circumstances of his murder, perpetrated by a nobleman called Bodilo in order to avenge a private wrong – having been sentenced by the king to corporal punishment without a trial –, would have hardly constituted what the theorists of resistance regarded as a justified tyrannicide. There is no insinuation that Bodilo had acted on a calling from God or that he had been mandated by the people to carry out the punishment of the king: on the contrary, his personal motivation is clearly pointed out by Hotman. Why was such a controversial case not obscured by Hotman, especially since he

did not lack for other examples, when depositions were carried out without recourse to regicide? A possible reason could be found in Hotman's antiquarian scruples, who felt compelled to cite all the cases of deposed kings from Frankish history. When mentioning the deposition of Childeric I, during the fifth century, Hotman makes a brief reference that this course of action was pursued as an alternative to simply slaying the erring king: "his subjects could no longer bear the detestable debaucheries which he committed with their daughters and not wanting to kill him, they deposed him" (Hotman 1574, 67). Could the implication of this statement be that the tyrannical king could have been executed by his people if the latter chose to do so? In the chapter on the deposition of kings, Hotman remains ambiguous and makes no firm commitment one way or the other, but, at a later point, he asserts that "the kings who by evil practices and deceptions oppress this saint and sacred liberty (...) break the most holy right which has ever existed between men, and rip apart the ties of all human society" (Hotman 1574, 107). Although Hotman does not openly condone tyrannicide, the gravity of the offence inherent in tyranny may suggest that all possible remedies, including regicide, could be considered. However, it is clear from Hotman's description of the role of the Estates General that he envisions the deposition of a tyrannical king in constitutional terms, which should negate the recourse to more violent means like regicide: the constitutional structure imagined by Hotman implies by default the king's submission to the decisions of the Estates, not necessarily in the sense of a willing agreement, but meaning that the deposed king was deprived of any means to forcefully oppose the Estates. In such a political structure, despite some isolated allusions to this possibility, which I have mentioned above, tyrannicide simply does not have a place, since it is never required. Is there a level of naivety in Hotman's argument? Without any doubt, but the same could be said of his description of the powers of the Estates General, which is both ahistorical and politically unrealistic. It was, indeed, absurd to assume that a king would meekly accept a sentence of deposition passed against him by an assembly of his subjects, or that the respective king would find no way to wage war against

his revolted subjects: but *Francogallia* is, rather, an expression of the monarchomach constitutional idealism, looking for ways to get rid of a tyrant, but without fully acknowledging the practical implications of such an act. Hotman acknowledged that rebellions did occur and his most illustrative example are the events surrounding the League of the Public Weal, a coalition of nobles which revolted in 1465, during the reign of Louis XI. Because that League put the concept of “public good” at the core of its governmental programme and its members claimed to be acting as representatives of the whole kingdom, a whole mythology of this war emerged in French public conscience, mythology which came to the fore during the Wars of Religion. However, this rebellion, according to Hotman’s description, occurred in the context of the degradation of the original constitution of the kingdom, due to the constant undermining from the Capetian kings: the rebellion took place in the absence of an Estates General, the institution usually responsible for calling to account a tyrannical king, and its main goal was the convocation of the respective Estates. Nor was its goal, according to Hotman, the deposition of the king, despite the misgovernment of Louis XI: instead, the rebels “sent ambassadors and letters to Paris, to the Parlement, to clerics, and to the rector of the University, asking them not to think that this army was gathered to commit violence against the person of the king, but to bring him to reason and to exercise the office of good king, as the consideration of the public good demanded it” (Hotman 1574, 173-174).

If François Hotman was so shy to talk about tyrannicide, one could assume that this could have been caused by the fact that he based his argument from *Francogallia* mainly on his interpretation of Frankish and French history: there were not many regicides in this history and one had to go back to the Merovingian era in order to find some examples. But, when analyzing the texts of the other two monarchomachs, Beza and Mornay, we find that both of them were equally not inclined to condone tyrannicide, even though they relied in their works on Biblical precedents, Greek and Roman history and the history of other European states, which could have provided them with much more instances of this sort.

In the words of Donald Kelley, Beza's *Right of Magistrates*, "took off from Calvin's view of resistance as well as the Magdeburg Confession" and "had a more religious orientation and depended more on the martyrological conception of 'cause'" (Kelley 1983, 309). Therefore, Beza focuses on transgressions against divine law as the first defining trait of tyranny (although not exclusively). He argues extensively that such commands, which are against God's law, should not be obeyed, but, instead, actively resisted, and extends this recommendation to secular injustices, as well. Although prayers should be the first resort, Beza denies "that is illicit for people oppressed by a manifest tyranny to use lawful remedies together with repentance and prayers" (Beza 1970, 11). On the contrary, no oath of loyalty could prevent a people from taking action against a tyrant, if that oath was in clear contradiction with equity and reason, because every people had a right to self-defense. However, the cancellation of this obligation fell upon the lawful magistrates of a kingdom, not upon private individuals, who were still bound by their previous obligations. And, more so, this resistance was not supposed to go as far as removing the tyrant from his throne, but only to prevent unjust commands from being carried out. Deposition was the responsibility of institutions such as "the Estates or those who held legislative power in that kingdom or empire": only they had the power to "repress and punish" a legitimate tyrant (Beza 1970, 20-24).

Some of the examples provided by Beza to justify this argument do involve the death of tyrants at the hands of the people's magistrates: thus, Beza mentions briefly that the Spartan ephors "chased out some of their kings, and punished others with death", but he elaborates much more on the case of the Biblical king of Judah, Amaziah. When asking whether Amaziah's killing was carried out by sedition or by right, Beza establishes what he considers to be the standards necessary to be met in order for a regicide to be considered lawful: Amaziah "was not killed by his servants", but by "a general league of those of Jerusalem", in the open, by "a public authority, and not by some sudden revolt", while the cause of his slaying "was not some private hatred, but his impiety, in direct contradiction to

the main part of his oath” (Beza 1970, 31-32). From this, it could be inferred that, according to Beza, a regicide carried out at the command of a sovereign assembly, against an unrepentant king, for a just cause and for the sake of public good, could be accepted. One needs to consider the fact that Beza, relying so much on Biblical sources, had to find a way to accommodate the examples of regicides from the Bible, which would not always follow constitutional procedures. How important was this can be inferred from the fact that Beza makes no mention of Edward II or Richard II from English history, although he would have had the opportunity when he praised the English constitutional arrangement, with a Parliament bridling the power of the king. Both Edward II and Richard II were two clear cases of overthrown tyrants, whose deposition was carried out by coalitions of nobles whom Beza would have clearly regarded as the kind of magistrates entitled to resist a tyrant, but the suspicions of murder that surrounded their deaths in prison likely offended Beza’s political and religious sensibilities. In this regard, it is quite conspicuous that all the examples of depositions provided by Beza from the history of contemporary states (from Denmark, Sweden, Scotland, the Empire, or France during the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties) end up, at worst, with the deposed rulers imprisoned, but not killed. However, the tyrant “violating all human and divine laws” was guilty of the greatest lese-majesty (Beza 1970, 48): this might seem to suggest that Beza could envision the capital punishment for such a terrible offence, but, when he discusses the king’s rapport with the people subjected to his rule following a contractual agreement, the punishment meted out in case of tyranny is forfeiture of his kingdom, paralleling the forfeiture of a fief in feudal law: “the emperor himself, as we have shown, owes homage to the empire, of which he is the first and sovereign vassal (and this must be more true or at least as true for the condition of kings with respect to their kingdoms), and, without doubt, as we have shown that is the practice everywhere, they lose their fiefs if they commit some felonies up to the point of becoming manifest and incorrigible tyrants” (Beza 1970, 52). Beza also referred to the example of David, who, while persecuted by Saul, spared

the life of the latter when he had him at his mercy: this happened, according to Beza, “because Saul still retained the royal throne, and David had no authority to take the kingdom from him, nor his life, which belonged to God and to the Estates of the kingdom” (Beza 1970, 56-57).

Just like Beza’s *Right of Magistrates*, Mornay’s *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos* relied on a combination of scriptural, historical and juridical arguments to make its case in favor of resistance. The main difference between the two works consists in the lesser emphasis placed on the role of the Estates General, in *Vindiciae*, as the main institution entitled to depose a tyrant: following the Catholic-dominated Estates from Blois, in 1576, the Huguenots undoubtedly realized that the Estates might not be the instrument they were hoping for in order to curb the religious persecutions. Donald Kelley describes *Vindiciae* as “a further radicalization because it was more abstract, more Biblical (and less institutional) and because it countenanced resistance on an international basis” (Kelley 1983, 309). Anne McLaren also argues that *Vindiciae* “opened the door to tyrannicide still further”: she based this assertion on *Vindiciae*’s use of the language of metamorphosis, in order “to deploy the conventional, albeit deeply felt, early modern antithesis between humanity (allied to God) and bestiality (allied to the devil)”. In this context, a tyrant becomes the equivalent of “predators and monsters” and, because he has abandoned his humanity, “it then becomes the duty of all people, even from beyond the ranks of the children of God, to preserve humanity from his depredations”: by “counterpoising man and beast”, Mornay “refers to natural law to extend the remit of those who might lawfully raise the sword against a tyrant, now defined as a beast in human guise” (McLaren 2006, 47-48). But the evidence that *Vindiciae* accepted the possibility of tyrannicide, in the right circumstances, is not based only on the use of such dehumanizing metaphors: first and foremost, it is the nature and the gravity of the crime (tyranny) that makes possible to consider such an option: because, on one hand, it allows for the most serious punishments and, on the other hand, makes it impossible, or at least extremely ill-advised, for

manifest tyranny to be tolerated, as it could lead to the destruction of the commonwealth.

The relationship between king and subjects is based on a set of fundamental conditions, which have been established since the Biblical kingdom of Israel and continued, according to the author, until the sixteenth century: the original sacrality of the pact between king and subjects was regularly reinforced by the coronation oaths which kings took after assuming the throne. It is clear that, by binding the king with such obligations, strengthened both by a millenarian tradition and by divine sanction, any attempt to break them was akin to sacrilege: “If the king should grow haughty on the basis of royal power and violate the public laws, and finally disregard the fealty he has given, then obviously by that very right he is considered to be condemned by that worst anathema, with which the church once condemned the Emperor Julian the Apostate” (Brutus 2003, 136). Probably the most damning trait of the tyrant was his deceitfulness (something which anticipates the rhetoric of the Catholic League, which would constantly emphasize this alleged trait in Henry III): “the adroit tyrant wants to appear to be what the king actually is. Since he knows that men are inflamed by love of virtue, so he understands that they are to be deceived by the shadow of virtue” (Brutus 2003, 145-147). Therefore, there are some statements in the text that show that *Vindiciae* was taking the option of armed resistance much farther than *Francogallia* or *Right of Magistrates* were prepared to do, albeit not without certain limitations. *Vindiciae* may have declared that “tyranny is not simply a crime; it is the chief and, as it were, a sort of summation of all crimes”, but this definition did not translate into an absolute license for those willing to oppose it. Whatever measures were taken to address the issue, they had to remain confined within the limits of the law, namely, they could be only what was permitted “either by right or just force” (Brutus 2003, 155). Therefore, the slaying of tyrants without title is categorically lawful, as it is clear from *Vindiciae*’s reference to the Athenians Harmodius and Aristogiton or the Romans Brutus and Cassius – and this rule clearly applies to anyone, not just to the official magistrates. But such punishments could

be extended to tyrants by practice, after all other recourses had been exhausted: a legitimate monarch who would slide into tyranny would place himself outside the boundaries of the law that otherwise protected even the most humble subjects and, thus, be “guilty of high treason against the kingdom or empire”: the implication of this charge is undoubtful, since high treason had always been a capital crime. *Vindiciae* states this in most uncertain terms when arguing that the tyrant could be “most justly punished according to the Julian law on public force” and, therefore, it is lawful “to move against him with force, guile, and every stratagem of war, as if against one who has been judged an enemy of the country and commonwealth” (Brutus 2003, 156).

Consequently, *Vindiciae* contains many more examples than *Francogallia* or *Right of Magistrates* of impious monarchs who met an unfortunate end due to their misdeeds, and uses a much harsher language with respect to tyrants, sometimes coming closer to the tone of the Catholic League. But since the tyrant is “judged an enemy of God and men” (Brutus 2003, 155), his destruction could be the result of a direct divine intervention or could be brought about by the earthly forces of the commonwealth tasked with repelling the tyrant. Some of *Vindiciae*’s examples are not classical tyrannicides, but cases of God’s retribution: Saul “was called a rebel by Samuel and eventually suffered the penalty for rebellion”, Jeroboam was punished with the death of his son, then “his whole race was extirpated by the act of Baasha down to the last male”, “Herod condemned Christ Himself, as if He had aspired to the kingdom” and, as a result, “he perished wretchedly and lost his own kingdom”, Julian “deserted Christ for the pagans; but shortly afterwards he suffered from the avenging right arm of that same ‘Galilean’” and contemporary monarchs who persecuted the Reformers “perished in the midst of their crime, and in the very act; others are borne from their triumph to the tomb” – a likely allusion to the deaths of Henry II and Mary Tudor (Brutus 2003, 24-26). The examples of the overthrown Roman tyrants, like Nero, Caligula, Domitian and Commodus, are brought up to illustrate the fate of those who “desired either to claim for themselves the honours due to God alone or to take them from God” and therefore “theirs were always horrible

deaths” (Brutus 2003, 29). The death of the tyrant, in such cases, is not the act of a mere mortal wishing to avenge injustice, not even that of the magistrate acting in his capacity to remove the source of misgovernment, but a cataclysmic event, the ineluctable outcome of the clash between the proud tyrant and God. But the people itself is entitled to resist, on the basis of the covenant between God, king and people, which made the last two responsible for each other’s behaviour: in restraining or punishing a king contravening God’s law, the people would act as God’s own agent and thus fulfill the obligations they assumed through their covenant. But this punishment was not to be carried out by the “whole multitude – that monster with countless heads”, who lacked both the wisdom and the authority to make such a decision, but by those who “have received authority from the people – the magistrates, clearly, who are inferior to the king and chosen by the people, or constituted in some other way” (Brutus 2003, 45-46). This is due to the fact that private individuals were not responsible for the fate of the whole commonwealth, which was not entrusted to them: the people can act against a tyrant only as a corporative whole, which automatically excludes any act of single-handed resistance.

Does *Vindiciae* extend this right of punishment to include the execution of the deposed tyrant? The example provided by *Vindiciae*, that of the biblical queen Athaliah, is not conclusive in this regard, because “she had usurped the kingdom of her grandsons”. This kind of tyrant, who lacked legitimate authority, was not protected by custom and law in the same way a lawful ruler was, and could be lawfully slain. Other Biblical examples of tyrannicides, like “Ehud who killed King Eglon of Moab” or “Jehu, who killed King Joram against whom he was fighting, extirpated the line of Ahab, and put to death all the followers of Baal” (Brutus 2003, 61-62), cannot constitute a general endorsement of such an action, because they were perpetrated at the express command of God. The cases of extraordinary individuals, answering a divine call, cannot provide a precedent or establish a constitutional rule, since “those clear signs by which God was accustomed to confirm the extraordinary vocation of these heroes are for the

most part lacking to us in this age” (Brutus 2003, 171). There might be a specific reason why *Vindiciae* singled out Athaliah, a queen, as the only example of tyrant who was slain after a specific legal procedure and not as an extraordinary event instigated directly by God: it is likely a veiled attack against Catherine de Medici, whose black legend was fully developed after 1572 and whom the Huguenots blamed for Saint-Bartholomew. Outside of an extraordinary authorization by God, the fate of a tyrant is to be decided by institutions such as the Estates General, as “on its authority kings were removed to monasteries for reasons of extravagance, idleness, or tyranny, to such an extent that whole lineages were deprived of succession to the kingdom” and which had the right “to expel a tyrant or an unworthy king, or to consign him to his relations and to establish a good king in his place” (Brutus 2003, 86). Mornay’s description of the role of the Estates indicates that the fate of a deposed king is to be either exile, or some form of imprisonment: he makes no mention of him being put to death, even following a lawful sentence. *Vindiciae* also refers to the example of Manlius Capitolinus – who came into conflict with the Roman Senate, was accused of aspiring to kingship and executed –, claiming that it will be lawful to “pass the same sentence” on the tyrant (Brutus 2003, 156): but since Manlius was a former Roman magistrate, no longer in office at the time of his sentencing, he would classify as a “tyrant without title”, in whose case there was little doubt that he could be resisted or killed by anyone, even private persons. *Vindiciae*’s references to the fate of two Roman emperors, Nero, the *bête noire* of Christian historiography, whom the Roman senate sentenced “to be an enemy of the commonwealth, and condemned him to death”, and Vitellius, who was, by command of the same Senate, “ignominiously mutilated, pulled through the city, and put to death” (Brutus 2003, 161) could be taken as an unambiguous endorsement of tyrannicide; so is his mention of the ahistorical example of Arbaces – an Assyrian general, in the account of the Greek historian Ctesias, quoted by Diodorus Siculus –, who “killed Sardanapalus, who was distributing provisions amongst women and lavishing royal resources on prostitutes” (Brutus 2003, 167). On the other hand,

contemporary examples are less bloody, namely, “Christian in Denmark, Eric in Sweden, and more recently still to Queen Mary in Scotland”, all monarchs who were deposed and imprisoned, but whose lives had been spared (in case of Mary Stuart, only at the time *Vindiciae* was written). Even the case of Edward II of England is given a “constitutional make over”, with the role of the Parliament in his deposition being significantly enhanced and Edward’s ulterior death in prison being conveniently glossed over. Despite *Vindiciae*’s virulence against tyranny, the endorsement of tyrannicide is clearly cautious: the only examples brought up to support it are not only far removed from the period when the text was written, but they are also some of the worst monarchs in the historiographical tradition of the sixteenth century. They could just as well be considered an educational warning to contemporary kings (who obviously would not want to be compared with the likes of Nero), and not a model of regicide to be followed in contemporary contexts.

Overall, the three major texts of the monarchomach corpus from the 1570s are extremely hesitant when discussing the issue of tyrannicide, and the historiographic consensus, at least with regard to *Francogallia* and *Right of Magistrates*, that the Huguenot monarchomachs rejected tyrannicide, is entirely correct. Only *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos* seems more open to the idea of slaying a tyrant, but, even in its case, there is no systematic analysis of the issue. Rather, there are occasional references that appear when *Vindiciae* discusses the punishment of tyrants: but it is worth noticing that this punishment is regarded as part of the process of removing the tyrant from power, instead of a fulfillment of justice. In his work *De Regno et Regali Potestate*, William Barclay refers to *Vindiciae* when he accuses the Catholic League of having borrowed the arguments of the Huguenots, because *Vindiciae* was the most radical of the three. Barclay did not make a clear distinction between deposition and tyrannicide, and, as we can see from the examples mentioned above, *Vindiciae* did not always establish this distinction either. It is true, though, that the scarcity of those examples and their temporal remoteness leaves room for doubt. At the same time, the monarchomachs’

treatment of the king as the first magistrate of the kingdom and their normalization of the discussion about deposition resulted, according to Paul-Alexis Mellet, in a desacralization of the king and “the development of the theories of tyrannicide once Henry de Navarre was in position to assume the throne of France” (Mellet 2007, 357). The Huguenots and the Catholic League desired each other’s destruction, but, through a strange turn of events, the monarchomach discourse on resistance prepared the ground for the unprecedented attacks of the Catholic League against Henry III.

3. The Radical Rhetoric of the Catholic League: 1589

The issue of tyrannicide became a political reality in 1589: in reaction to Henry III murdering the duke Henry de Guise and his brother, the cardinal Louis de Guise, in the castle of Blois, the Catholic League, through the voice of Sorbonne, proclaimed the deposition of the king – something that the Huguenots never did with respect to Charles IX, after Saint-Bartholomew. Therefore, the rhetoric of the League did not limit itself to abstract speculations on the rights of the subjects, but it was actually put into practice, in a propaganda campaign aiming to persuade the French public opinion to contribute to the elimination of Henry III from the political stage. Nicolas Le Roux argued that “Saint-Bartholomew constituted the peak of this form of exterminating violence that the Catholic preachers called for, and the long memory of the event played a part in the preparation of the minds for the tyrannicide” (Le Roux 2006, 76). There had already been a constant degradation of Henry III’s prestige during the 1580s, both due to his personal failings and due to his unwillingness to carry out a policy of relentless repression against the Huguenots. Claude Haton described how “in 1581 the religious radicals in his parish refused to take part in public prayers for an heir, desiring Henry’s ‘death and the extermination of his entire lineage’”, which shows that “ordinary people, who surely had no acquaintance with the new Protestant literature justifying tyrannicide, were already imagining the king’s death in the early 1580s” (Carroll 2009, 235). In 1589, the anti-Huguenot violence of the Catholics from the preceding decades was going

to be directed against the treacherous king: this juxtaposition between the image of Henry III and the image of the heretic led to the conclusion that they could and should meet the same fate. Henry III was not, formally, a Protestant, but for the Catholic League this was only a deception, a mask which fell off with the events at Blois. In support of this notion, the Catholic League could appeal to the Church tradition that condemned those Catholics who favored heresy or merely failed to suppress it: and there was no doubt in their minds that Henry III had allied himself with the Huguenots, something which the League propaganda openly asserted. On 7 January 1589, the Sorbonne not only that it declared Henry III to be deposed, but also authorized the rebellion “for the conservation of the Roman Church”, because the king had violated public faith by assassinating the Guise brothers, “to the prejudice of the Catholic religion, the edict of Holy Union and the natural liberty of the Estates of the kingdom” (Le Roux 2006, 162). As pointed out by Janine Garrisson, “the League system would have made France a veritable theocracy, for the French people, the kingmakers themselves, swore ‘to believe as the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church believes, and to live and die in that belief’, and it was obvious that only the ‘Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic religion’ would be ‘permitted, received, and professed in this realm’” (Garrisson 1995, 315). As we saw when discussing this matter in *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos*, it could be a short distance from advocating resistance against tyrants to urging their murder. The fiercest attacks against Henry III, including the calls for regicide, came from the Parisian clergy associated with the League: François Pigenat, *curé* at Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs, was the first to call for tyrannicide on 9 January 1589, when he asked his audience whether “there was not someone amongst them to avenge the death of the duke by putting the tyrant to death” (Le Roux 2006, 98). According to Tatiana Debbagi Baranova, because the political accusations against Henry III may have seemed insufficient for some to justify the virulence of the attacks, the League transformed the political confrontation into a religious one, where the fallen king is depicted as an earthly avatar of the devil; in these circumstances, defaming the king becomes the obligation of

each preacher (Debbagi Baranova 2012, 107). There were more than two hundred pamphlets published in Paris against Henry III until his assassination on 1 August 1589 and they cover the king in insults, hurling every accusation possible, in an attempt to tarnish his image, laying thus the groundwork for the future regicide (Bernard 2011, 245-247).

One of the first pamphlets published in the aftermath of the Blois assassinations, called *Le Faux visage descouvert du fin Renard de la France. Ensemble quelques anagrammes et sonnets*, dating from 15 January 1589, depicts Henry III as a Machiavellian figure, in a stark contrast with that of the saintly Christian knight, the duke of Guise: with the motto “tyrannicidae praemium detur” on the first page, the text of the pamphlet asks plainly “what loyalty can you have for this tyrant who had the one who maintained and preserved his crown against the outrages of the heretics stabbed, without any respect for the holy assembly of the estates?” (*Faux visage* 1589, 7-8). Despite the implications of the text’s motto, *Le Faux visage* does not include a direct call for regicide, only an appeal to “avenge” the two Guise brothers and an argument for Henry’s automatic exclusion from the Christian community, as someone who consorted with “the pillars of Satan, the heretics and the *politiques*” and, because of this deed, became unworthy of the name of Christian. The text is addressed mainly to the French clergy, “messieurs les ecclesiastiques”, which explains why, although the author calls for the rejection of Henry III as both king and fellow Christian, he remains ambiguous on the matter of regicide: the clergy could be expected to raise their voices against the tyrant, following the many Biblical precedents, to preach the fight against him regardless of personal cost, but not to personally shed his blood. One of the most active propagandists of the League, Jean Boucher, published, likewise, a pamphlet called *La Vie et faits notables de Henry de Valois, maintenant tout au long sans rien requérir*, a brief biography of the king from the perspective of the rebellious League, whose alleged purpose was “to destroy the Church of God”: therefore, amongst all tyrannical crimes, Henry III was guilty of the worst, the one which should immediately attract his deposition. According to Boucher, Henry III’s entire reign was marked by

attempts at accommodating the heretics, at the expense of the Catholic Church, and by despoiling the people to satiate the greed of his favorites, living the life of a “Caligula, Elagabalus and Nero” (Boucher 1589, 34), the most salacious examples of tyrants from Roman history – and who all ended up overthrown. Not just your typical tyrant who oppressed his subjects, Henry III is a monarch who practiced sorcery (Boucher 1589, 48-49): the murders from Blois were merely the culmination of a monstrous career. What fate Boucher had in mind for Henry III is implied at the end of the pamphlet, when the author refers once again to the king as “Nero” and expresses his hope that, with the help of God, the people of France will overthrow “this yoke of tyranny which burdened them for fourteen years and make the Catholic Church regain its shine and splendor in France” (Boucher 1589, 63-64).

Regardless whether a text argued openly for regicide or not, portraying a monarch as a persecutor of the Church was bound to lead to that outcome. In the words of Nancy Lyman Roelker, in such circumstances, “it became not merely legitimate but meritorious for anyone to assassinate him, without any special authorization” (Roelker 1996, 187). But one can encounter open calls to regicide, as well: for instance, in texts like *Origine de la maladie de la France avec les remedes propres à la guarison d’icelle, avec une exhortation a l’entretienement de la guerre*. In this text, beset by heresy, France was in need of salvation and, therefore, “one need not fear sacrifice his own life and that of the tyrant for the preservation of the faith and for the public good”. The coronation of the king, the oaths of loyalty his subjects had taken are not absolute in the author’s opinion: his vision is that of a contractual monarchy, where a king was to be obeyed only as long as he faithfully fulfilled the duties of his office. There is a clear incompatibility between an unworthy individual and the office of kingship, which justified the deposition of unsuitable monarchs. The author of the pamphlet asks rhetorically “what proof of his valiance has he ever given against the enemies of our faith?” and concludes that “with his hypocrisy and simulated religion, he has only deceived and cheated us” (*Origine* 1589, 8). The solution to this problem was Henry’s

imprisonment in a monastery, but the pamphlet makes a clear allusion that regicide could and should also be an option, when pointing out that the king's life could be ritually sacrificed "to those whom he had wretchedly killed" (*Origine* 1589, 9).

For the League, Henry III became only Henry de Valois, "tyrant", "apostate" and "perfidious", and the destruction of all symbols associated with him in Paris provided the image of a symbolical death in anticipation of his physical assassination on 1 August 1589. Nicolas Le Roux refers to the effects of this iconoclastic fury that seized the Parisian crowds in the aftermath of the Blois murders as a "virtual death" of the king, whose function was to "restore the order of God in a city that saw itself as a new Jerusalem besieged by the forces of evil" and, therefore, rid the capital "of the stains that a king now stripped of his authority and turned into a mere individual had inflicted upon him" (Le Roux 2006, 98-99). Basically, all the traces of Henry III had to be eradicated and this process continued until his death: on 5 April, the same Sorbonne removed the name of the king from the mass, replacing the words "Pro Rege nostro" with "Pro Christianis Principibus nostris" (Le Roux 2006, 162-163). And, even though the official pronouncements of the League were trying to steer clear of the radicalism of the preachers and of the Seize – a political group controlling Paris and guilty of some of the worst excesses of the League –, echoes of it could be found amongst its upper ranks: a letter of Jacques de Diou, abbot of Orbais, to the duke of Mayenne from 17 April 1589 in which he briefly and frankly wished that his master would "exterminate completely" that tyrant (Henri III) together with Henry de Navarre (Zwierlein 2015, 58-59), is revealing for the true feelings of the League leadership. Other pamphlets also expressed their desire for the downfall of the king, but they urged Henry III to admit his crimes and abdicate voluntarily. Such was the case of *Response de Dom Bernard doyen de l'oratoire de S. Bernard des Feuillantins lez Paris, à une lettre à luy escrite & envoyee par Henry de Valois*, written by the dean of the feuillant monastery, dom Bernard de Montgaillard. Dom Bernard referred to the king as "traitor to the Catholic faith", "excommunicate (...) removed from the body of the Church like a putrid member",

“parricide”: since the text was addressing the king directly, the author urged him to abdicate in order to expiate his sins, but he also presented him with the fate of Biblical tyrants, “the stubborn Pharaoh, the arrogant Antiochus and the hopeless Herod” – as a reminder to the king of what befell the rulers who rose up against God (Montgaillard 1589, 49-52). Dom Bernard clearly accepts a right of revolt against a tyrant, but the fact that he asks Henry III to abdicate would suggest that the Sorbonne’s deposition from 7 January had not persuaded all the League’s supporters. It is conspicuous that Dom Bernard threatens the king with divine punishment, not with assassination. Coupled with the efforts made by diverse pamphleteers to prove that the oaths sworn to Henry III were invalidated by his crimes, Dom Bernard’s hesitations show how entrenched was the prestige of the French monarchy in the French society and how much effort the League had to expend in order to put the theoretical discussions about deposition of hypothetical tyrants into actual practice. The sentence of excommunication which the League was hoping to obtain from pope Sixt V – which was supposed to confirm the *de facto* excommunication incurred, in the opinion of the League, by Henry III for the murder of a cardinal - was particularly important, because, according to many Catholic opinions, the pope could invalidate an oath of loyalty and it would have eased the League’s efforts to keep severing the ties between the Frenchmen and their king; but also because, in the words of Paul-Alexis Mellet, at the moment the excommunication was formally pronounced, the regicide was no longer the task of a particular subject, but of God Himself, directly or through a providential man (Mellet 2006, 6).

The most important political tract of the League during this period was Jean Boucher’s *De justa Henrici tertii abdicatione*: it presented several similarities with the monarchomach works, which was remarked by their contemporaries and made some historians to argue that the monarchomachs served as a source of inspiration for the anti-royalist Leaguer rhetoric. Others, such as Cornel Zwierlein or Arlette Jouanna, suggested that these common ideas can be attributed to a common scholastic culture. However, as pointed

out by Arlette Jouanna, the Leaguers diverged significantly from the Huguenot monarchomachs by “assigning to the civil power the exclusive goal of making the unity of the faith triumph” (Jouanna 2013, 332). What Boucher and the monarchomachs had in common was the idea of the sovereignty of the people, the concept of a conditional contract between people and king and the legitimacy of resistance and deposition if the contract was broken by the king. What is peculiar about Boucher’s work is that he “eliminated the monarch from the contract between God and the people” and “any individual member of the *respublica* was not only justified, but required to take up arms to remove a tyrant who had ignored and violated God’s laws” (Holt 2005, 134; see also Baumgartner 1975, 123-144). Unlike in the Huguenot works, where, at best, we have only hints about the legitimacy of tyrannicide and do not make it a significant subject of discourse, Boucher’s analysis of the matter “was perhaps the very first theoretical development of a theory to legitimate the tyrannicide of a crowned living king, not a prince or a king in general, but even directly addressing the specific person of either Henri III or Henry de Valois” (Zwierlein 2015, 148). For Boucher, it was the religious sanction what made the act of tyrannicide legitimate, a sanction that came from two authority sources: the Sorbonne, which had long regarded itself as the ultimate scholarly arbiter in matters of Catholic doctrine, and the pope. Boucher was not entirely on solid ground here, because, while the Sorbonne acted according to his expectations, proclaiming the king’s deposition, the pope Sixt V did not and, in fact, delayed the pronouncement of a formal excommunication against Henry III, although he expressed a clear disapproval over the murder of the cardinal de Guise. In such circumstances, as pointed out by Cornel Zwierlein, the League “needed a legitimacy basis for action as autarkic as possible”, which resulted in the development of “a quasi natural law of tyrannicide, independent from the pope and any other authority” (Zwierlein 2015, 150). In Sophie Nicholls’ analysis, “*De Justa Abdicatione* presented the case for the legitimate assassination of a tyrant based on the existence of a Roman-legal contractual relationship between king and people”, where the sentence of deposition is passed by the

people or the Church and, consequently, the would-be assassin would act on it, albeit under divine inspiration (Nicholls 2021, 68-74). This causal link is a distinctive feature of Leaguer thought and the way of solving the dilemma raised by the Huguenot monarchomachs, that of the uncertainty involved in the claims of a divine calling and the difficulty of distinguishing between frauds and individuals truly inspired by God: for Jean Boucher, the will of the faithful people or the sentence of the Church express the divine will and expose the tyrant to any kind of attack.

Nicolas Le Roux argues that the actual calls to murder prior to 1 August 1589 were rather rare, because, for many Catholics, it was up to God to punish the evil king, and the authorities of the League proclaimed openly the legitimacy of tyrannicide only after Henry III's assassination (Le Roux 2006, 99). The observation is correct but, even in their absence, the demonization of Henry III, with the incredible litany of misdeeds attributed to him by the Leaguer propaganda, served the same purpose: a demonic king, which consorted with the devil, could have only one fate, death and damnation, and it was the duty of any good Christian to carry it out. In the words of Janine Garrisson, killing a tyrant "became a good work, automatically meriting salvation" and the individual carrying out this deed, Jacques Clément, had God on his side (Garrisson 1995, 314). Since one of the major themes of the Leaguer propaganda was that Henry III had indulged in demonical practices like sorcery (*Les Sorcelerics* 1589), it was easy for the League to claim that his killer "had providential inspiration and authority": since the devil was present in Henry III, then God had to be present in Jacques Clément "for any act so momentous as the murder of the great and powerful" (Ranum 1980, 70). A pamphlet from 1589, called *Le Tyrannicide ou mort du tyran*, published in the aftermath of the king's assassination, describes the regicide as an act commanded by God himself, because "God wished to help France and deliver it from its suffering" and therefore called "a savior, a man with the body and soul clothed in virtue" (*Tyrannicide ou mort* 1589, 11-12). Paul-Alexis Mellet argues that the fact that the pamphlet was approved for printing by "Messieurs du Conseil

de la Sainte Union des Catholiques” gives a precise idea about the atmosphere in Paris during the League’s control (Mellet 2007, 47). Consequently, preachers and pamphleteers were called to justify the action of Jacques Clément (Babelon 2009, 437). A pamphlet called *Discours véritable de l’estrangé et subite mort de Henry de Valois*, published anonymously by a “a monk of the order of the Jacobins” claimed that the regicide occurred with “divine permission”. The pamphlet depicts the image of a France brought to the brink of physical and spiritual destruction by Henry III; what moved Jacques Clément to action was “the total ruin and burning of the kingdom of France” and “the calamity of the people” but, even in such circumstances, Clément is presented as not having taken action until directly called by an angel of God to do so (*Discours véritable* 1589, 3-4). Basically, for the League pamphleteers, in order to be commendable, the tyrannicide must have a religious justification: it is not a human institution which passes the sentence in this case, but God himself who delivers the people from tyranny and saves the Church. Another such work, called *Les propheties merueilleuses advenues a l’endroit de Henry de Valois, 3. de ce nom, jadis Roy de France*, depicts the former king as a demonical figure and the French civil war as part of the Biblical struggle between good and evil: a king who transformed from “the elder son of the Church” into the “elder son of the devil” could, obviously, no longer command any allegiance from true Christians. Therefore, he deserved to be “deprived of Crown and scepter”: the author points out that a tyrant could be imprisoned or driven into exile, but his references to Henry III as a modern equivalent of Nero and Julian the Apostate imply a much harsher fate. Consequently, the end of Henry III is treated as a miracle carried out by God, his death having been preordained. Clément is not mentioned directly in this text, but the implication would be that the Jacobin monk was the instrument of divine punishment.

4. Conclusion

The cause for the difference in approach between the Huguenot monarchomachs from the 1570s and the Catholic League can be found, to a great extent, in the different political

context: the Huguenots' discussion of the deposition of tyrants remained purely theoretical. They did get to put into practice their notions of resistance, first during the 1560s – when the reality of their rebellion was cautiously hidden under the pretext that they were merely seeking redress, from the king, for the injustices they were enduring –, then after Saint-Bartholomew. However, they never found themselves in a position where they could attack the king openly and personally and ask for his overthrow: the Huguenot party never included a radical faction as influential as the Parisian *Seize* in the Catholic League, which was the main driving force in the campaign against Henry III and his successor. On the contrary, the Huguenot leading personalities had a vested interest in not pushing things too far and keep the possibility of reconciliation with the king open, regardless of the vituperations from *Right of Magistrates* or *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos*. Unlike the Catholic League, which relied on Sorbonne's declaration and the hoped-for excommunication from Sixt V, the Huguenots had no grounds on which to dispute the legitimacy of Charles IX, nor did they manage to obtain control of the appropriate institution, the Estates General, which, in their opinion, was the only one entitled to pronounce a sentence of deposition against the king.

For the League, on the other hand, their conflict with Henry III was transformed into an apocalyptic battle between good and evil, between the kingdom of Christ and the domain of Satan, with the religious future of France at stake. As a demonic king, Henry III could obviously no longer be "the most Christian king of France", regardless of his lineage and the laws of the kingdom. And, more importantly, the Catholic League was offered the chance of seeing the tentative theories of tyrannicide turn into reality with the deed of Jacques Clément. It also came easier for the League to call for tyrannicide, because they fought against Henry III mostly on religious grounds: although the list of Henry's misdeeds included what one could call "secular crimes", acts of injustice without a particular spiritual implication, they did not weigh as much as the spiritual accusations brought against him. The Huguenot monarchomachs did not dwell too much on the

possibility of avengers raised by God to punish tyrants and prefer to focus on constitutional solutions: for the League, on the other hand, caught in a battle with eschatological implications, for the salvation of France, Jacques Clément's deed is a reenactment of the Biblical tyrannicides, a miracle, even, and it is on these grounds that the League pamphleteers attempt to justify it.

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