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Noble Culture, Aristocratic Masculinity, and Violence during the Wars of Religion

By

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Introduction

Amid the rise of Protestantism and growing tensions between the Catholics and the Protestants, the massacre at Vassy in 1562, led by the Duke of Guise and his troops, set off a series of battles, later known as the Wars of Religion (1562-1598).[1] Subsequent peace treaties were undermined by repeated incidents of religious violence—perpetrated by nobility—that undermined and even subverted royal efforts toward peaceful coexistence.[2] The Day of the Barricades in 1588 witnessed a bloody uprising of Parisian people against King Henry III, which would have been impossible without the participation of Catholic high nobility.[3] This event escalated the conflict between the moderate party (led by the royalist force) and the Catholic League (headed by the Guises and other Catholic nobility). It led to Henry III's decision to order the murder of the Guises and his subsequent assassination in 1589.[4] This chain of events ultimately facilitated the ascension of Henry IV, the only heir presumptive to the throne of France.

These two violent events involving aristocracy in late sixteenth-century France challenge the German sociologist Norbert Elias' model of "civilizing process," during which warrior nobility underwent a gradual transformation into courtiers characterized by stricter standards of

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[1]Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 50–75.

[2]R. J. Knecht, *French Civil Wars, 1562-1598* (Routeldge, 2016). Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[3]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 129.

[4]Knecht, *French Civil Wars, 1562-1598*, 72-3.

behavior and emotional control.[5] Particularly, their lives changed dramatically in sixteenth-century France, from a life previously divided between war, tournaments, and hunts to a life circumscribed by princely courts, which demanded more extensive control and regulation of noble behavior.[6] However, Elias does not fully account for the persistent violence exhibited by the nobility that participated in the Wars of Religion, which suggested that this transition of forms of life does not apply uniformly to all the nobility in the sixteenth century. Elias acknowledges that periods of social upheaval may trigger a reduction of self-control, a regression in social manners, and thereby an increase in violence.[7] Elias' perspective suggests that the underlying trend of noble behavior is towards increasing pacification and restraint, interrupted only by occasional regressions when social controls were weak. Yet, the enduring noble violence during the Wars of Religion suggests that these violent behaviors were not anomalies or temporary lapses, but a consistent feature of noble conduct during this period. Therefore, the civilizing process for the nobility was not linear but more fractious than he envisioned.

Elias posits that violent impulses were innate to humans so that increasingly strong social controls, through the establishment of royal courts and centralization of state power, was crucial in civilizing noble conduct.[8] This view revolves around the idea that the nobility learned to curb their immediate violent impulses and internalized social norms enforced by the consolidation of the state's monopoly of violence and the creation of a centralized administration. This

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[5]Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 3-35, 47-54, 161-172,181-2, 387-390.

[6]Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 181.

[7]Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 162, 170.

[8]Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 67-70, 162-166, 185-344.

perspective suggests that, in the context of the Wars of Religion, the reduction in social controls, such as the royal authority's control over the nobility, can be seen as the primary cause of the resurgence of noble violence. Elias primarily attributes the resurgence of violence to a temporary lapse in social control during periods of social upheaval, based on the assumption that aggressive impulses are natural human drives that need to be curbed by social controls.

However, the sixteenth-century French nobleman and statesman Michel de Montaigne provides a critical counterpoint by highlighting how the aristocratic upbringing and cultural expectations reinforced a sense of entitlement for the nobility to demonstrate courage and secure honor through violence. Montaigne observes the deliberate fostering of violence and aggressive impulses among young aristocratic boys through cultural practices under parental influence.[9] The military profession was glorified as "the proper, only, and essential form of nobility in France" among the nobility.[10] The cult of military strength reinforces the link between aristocratic violence and masculine identity. The Wars of Religion offered a testing ground for them to prove or defend their manliness and nobility through violence. Based on Montaigne's perspective, violent actions by nobles like the Duke of Guise during the wars can be seen as expressions of a deeply ingrained cultural ethos that equated the nobility's masculine and aristocratic identity with their ability to wield violence effectively. Montaigne's insights suggest violent behavior among the nobility could not be simply explained by spontaneous natural drive, as Elias

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[9]See "De la coštume et de ne changer aisément une loy recüe" in Michel de Montaigne, *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, ed. Albert Thibaudet, 2.253 ed. (Belgique: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1950). This view is expressed again by Mousnier in the twentieth century, see Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy, 1598-1789, Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[10]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 421: "a forme propre, et seule, et essencielle, de noblesse en France."

explains, but was cultivated and valorized through a cultural ethos that celebrated martial prowess and violent behavior.

Thus, noble violence during the Wars of Religion should not be understood as merely a consequence of weakened social controls but an integral part of the nobility's way of asserting and maintaining their status and identity. The increase in violence during the Wars of Religion was driven by the cultural imperatives of the nobility, rather than a natural response to weakened social controls. While Elias' model accounts for the role of social control in moderating behavior, it does not fully capture the ways that noble violence was an expression of a different kind of social control. By examining French nobility's violent practices during the Wars of Religion through the lens of noble culture, this thesis argues that the propensity for violence among sixteenth-century French warrior nobility was deeply rooted in the aristocratic culture of the time. The Wars of Religion served as sites of social performance, where French warrior nobility sought to defend their manhood and consolidate their nobility through performances of courage and manipulations of violence, which were culturally sanctioned and expected. This argument challenges Elias' view by showing violence as an integral part of warrior nobles' conception of their cultural identity and societal roles in late sixteenth-century France.

One may ask about the credibility of Montaigne's reflections in *Essais* and the depth of his understanding of French nobility. In addition to his aristocratic lineage, Montaigne was believed to have social interactions with great nobles of his era.[11] His early career in the

[11]Gascon de Foix was believed to be Montaigne's patron who had played a role in Montaigne's political ascension and access to the Court (See in Philippe Desan's chapter "The public life of Montaigne" in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*). Montaigne was believed to have attempted to negotiate a reconciliation between Henry of Navarre and the duke of Guise during the 1570s (xvi, in Donald Frame's version of *The Complete Works of Michel de Montaigne*). Montaigne's interaction with Marshal de Matignon, as recorded in their correspondences, was largely concentrated during Montagine's terms as the mayor of Bordeaux (see in Donald Frame's version of *The Complete Works of Michel de Montaigne*).

parlement of Bordeaux in 1560s, political role as the mayor of Bordeaux from 1581 to 1584, and later intermediary position between the Catholic king Henry III and the Huguenot prince Henry of Navarre, later Henry IV, gave him an insider perspective on the intricacy of noble conflicts and connections and to the political and religious context.[12] Hence, his experiences equipped him with ample knowledge of nobility and the Wars of Religion and thus made him an ideal witness and analyst of the Wars of Religion. The *Essais* were a living document of Montaigne's era.

Montaigne's perspective, namely his critique of French nobility in *Essais*, can be contextualized within the broader changes and tensions of the aristocracy at the time. Sixteenth-century France witnessed a rapid transformation of the aristocracy both as a governing body and a social group. The demands of ongoing wars necessitated military services from new recruits. The reconfiguration within noble ranks reflected instability of noble status and prestige at the time. For example, Montaigne implicitly complained about the negative impact of the creation of the Order of the Holy Ghost and recognition of new members upon the nobility within the Order of Saint Michel, the older Older of Chivalry.[13] He emphasized that honor is a privilege and the main essence of which lies in its rarity, suggesting that the proliferation of new honors diluted the prestige of those already within the noble ranks and undermined the traditional value of exclusivity associated with noble status.[14] In addition, the sales of offices allowed new nobility from the bourgeoisie to ascend into the aristocracy and these newcomers often assumed the

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[12]Philippe Desan, "The public life of Montaigne" essay in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan (Oxford University Press, 2016), 117-138.

[13]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 418-419.

[14]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 419: "l'honneur, c'ešt un privilège qui tire sa principale essence de la rareté."

administrative or parliamentary offices in France.[15] As social mobility brought two different social groups into one governing body, conflicts within the aristocracy became inevitable. The robe nobility, distinct from the hereditary or sword nobility, often originated from bourgeoisie and derived their status not through ancestral military achievements but by holding administrative or judicial offices. Montaigne's family epitomized this upward mobility from bourgeois origin to nobility.[16] More broadly, therefore, Montaigne's reflection upon the values, cultural identity, and duties of the aristocracy can be understood as an attempt to find and redefine the roles and identity of aristocracy during periods of transformation of French aristocracy.

Admittedly, Montaigne's critical stance on aristocratic culture and interest in the nobility was influenced by his positions as a member of the robe nobility and a *Politique*. The *Politiques* were a moderate group who prioritized the restoration of a strong monarchy to religious conflicts and often advocated for the peace and tolerance between the Catholics and the Protestants against the zealous partisanship that characterized some nobility at the time. Montaigne's critique of the aristocratic culture that promoted violence was thereby inseparable from his view of the traditional nobility's role in perpetuating division and violence that were detrimental to the well-being of the monarchy during the Wars of Religion. Despite Montaigne's critical stance, he was not alone in recognizing the centrality of violence in noble culture. His observations are corroborated by the reflections of Blaise de Monluc, the Lieutenant-General of Guyenne and a

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[15]William Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France*, 134, 135-144. The sale of offices created an avenue of social mobility for the bourgeoisie to purchase positions of power and privileges. These newcomers often assumed the administrative or parliamentary offices in France.

[16]Philippe Desan, "From Eyquem to Montaigne" essay in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan (Oxford University Press, 2016), 17-39.

prominent military figure during the Wars of Religion. In *Commentaires de Messire Blaise de Monluc***,** Monluc described the relentless pursuit of military glory, the difficulty of maintaining one's honor and reputation on the battlefield, and the pressure to constantly demonstrate and prove one's bravery.[17] Monluc's vivid account from the perspective of warrior nobility supports Montaigne's observations about the cultural ethos that valorized martial prowess and violent behavior among the nobility. Montaigne's insights in the nobility also exemplified the clash of two different sets of values within the aristocracy: the judgment, education and interests in moral and intellectual virtues represented by the robe nobility against the martial ethos of traditional hereditary sword nobility.[18] Montaigne's understanding of nobility, with an emphasis on "virtue and competence" and "kindness and gentleness of manner," demonstrated an ideal of nobility embodied the characters of robe nobility and stood in stark contrast to the traditional values of the sword nobility that extolled ancestral lineage and martial prowess.[19] It was based on this understanding that Montaigne delved into the conventional noble ideal of valor and its impact on warrior nobility's identity and behavior. It was within this context of seeking resolutions for the

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[17]Blaise de Monluc and Florimond de Raemond, *Commentaires de Messire Blaise de Monluc, Maréchal de France ; Blasi Monluci, Franciae Mareschalli, Tumulus...*, *Gallica.bnf.fr* (A Bourdeaus. Par S. Millanges imprimeur ordinaire du roy. M. D. XCII, 1592), https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8610762b/f3.vertical.

[18]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 420. For example, Montaigne's reconceptualization of the noble ideal of valor, consisting in fortitude and assurance of soul ("une force et asseurance de l'âme") and established through habit, education example, and custom ("l'usage, l'institution, l'exemple et la costume"), exemplified how the martial character of the warrior nobility was converted into a new virtue that upheld the values of the robe nobility and aligned with the moderate principles of the *Politiques*.

[19]Montaigne, "De l'affection des pères aux enfans," 426: "Il faut se rendre respectable par sa vertu et par sa suffisance, et aimable par sa bonté et douceur de ses meurs." This quote is preceded by Montaigne's discussion of the family relationships of the landed aristocracy (as evidenced by Montaigne's use of "un Seigneur"), and thus clearly refers to the aristocracy.

monarchy and the competing ideals of nobility that Montaigne reflected upon the duty and roles of nobility.

Montaigne's observation and documentation of noble culture in his *Essais* shed light on how upbringing and cultural norms impacted warrior nobility's self-perception and behavior. Montaigne traced the cruelty exhibited by the noblemen to their boyhood and denounced how aristocratic parents intentionally encouraged their children's performances of violence as expressions of martial spirit.[20] He examined the concept of valor and its association with aristocratic pursuits of reputation and social status.[21] More importantly, Montaigne's reflections upon a prevailing aristocratic culture of violence provides insights into the assertion and preservation of aristocratic manhood behind violence by noting how the warrior nobility's honor and dignity were maintained through demonstrations of valor.[22] The external validation of valor and military deeds, achieved through reputation and noble ranks, necessitated a relentless pursuit of violence. The intrinsic link between noble male honor and continuous display of bravery suggested the impact of this aristocratic culture (that emphasized the cult of valor) on violence perpetuation during the Wars of Religion. Thus, Montaigne's *Essais* served as invaluable contemporary testimonies to the cultural motivations that underpinned the violent actions committed by warrior nobility.

The approach of the paper is partly grounded in a reassessment of the historiographical trend in analyzing the Wars of Religion. Historians Mack Holt, R.J. Knecht, and Denis Crouzet have approached the Wars of Religion by tracing underlying structural factors, such as religious

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[20]Montaigne, "De la coštume et de ne changer aisément une loy recüe," 137.

[21]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 421-422.

[22]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 421-422.

belief and conflicts of interest rooted in cultural and social dynamics.[23] Despite their efforts to balance structural explanations with the contingencies of individual actions, this method suggests a pattern of analyzing the procession of the Wars of Religion through a broad and structural lens that emphasizes systematic influences over independent agency. Individual actions and decisions, particularly those of the participating sectarian nobles, are often analyzed to serve the purpose of supporting their overarching interpretations of the Wars of Religion. Moving beyond these grand narratives, the current paper re-examines two pivotal moments, the Massacre of Vassy and the Day of the Barricade, to uncover previously overlooked dimensions (the cultural and personal motivations behind noble violence) that contribute to new understandings of these episodes and the proceeding of the Wars of Religion.

Understanding about the massacre of Vassy primarily revolves around its consequences, namely how it sparked the civil wars.[24] The motives of the nobility behind it have been less extensively explored. Analysis of both Huguenot and Guise accounts, alongside an evaluation of Guise's social milieu, suggests that the massacre might have been precipitated by the nobility's need for self-defense in response to perceived provocations by the Protestants.[25] The

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[23]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion*, 2. Knecht, *French Civil Wars*, *1562-1598*. Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerriers de Dieu* (Editions Champ Vallon, 2005.)

[24]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion*. Knecht, *French Civil Wars, 1562-1598*.

[25]Guise account in *Mémoires de Condé Ou Recueil Pour Servir a l'Histoire de France. Tome 3 / , Contenant Ce Qui S' Est Passé de plus Mémorable Dans Le Royaume, Sous Le Regne de François II. & Sous Une Partie de Celui de Charles IX. Où l'on Trouvera Des Preuves de l'Histoire de M. De Thou : Augmentés d'Un Grand Nombre de Piéces Curieuses, Qui N'ont Jamais Été Imprimées, & Enrichis de Notes Historiques & Critiques ; Avec Plusieurs Portraits, & Deux Plans de La Bataille de Dreux. Tome Premier [-Cinquième]*, *Gallica.bnf.fr* (A Paris, chez Rollin fils, quai des Augustins, à S. Athanase. M. DCC. XLIII, 1743). Huguenot account in Jean Crespin, *Histoire Des Martyres: Persecutez et Mis a Mort Pour Le Vérité de L'evangile, Depuis Le Temps Des Apostres Jusques a Present (L6l9)*, Ed. nouv. / précédée d'une introduction par Daniel Benoit et accompagnée de notes [par Matthieu Lelièvre] (Toulouse: Société des Livres Religieux, 1885).

provocations by the perceived Protestants were seen as assaults on their honor and threats to their power. Guise's subsequent detour to Paris, despite being summoned by Catherine de Medici, suggests an attempt to reinforce his aristocratic status and reputation through public affirmation. Therefore, the acts of violence can be interpreted as efforts to validate and maintain his noble identity.

The Day of the Barricades is usually perceived as a popular uprising led by the Council of the Sixteen against the tyrannical rule of Henry III. However, Nicolas Poulain's account suggests that this was preceded by an aristocratic conspiracy, given the leading roles played by the Catholic military commanders and the duke of Guise in plotting against Henry III.[26] Carroll asserts that Guise did not share the same objective with the populace to overthrow the monarchy but more intended to demonstrate his worth and win recognition from Henry III to replace the king's male favorite, the duke of Épernon.[27] Carroll's view is further bolstered by current

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[26]Nicolas Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL d'Un Nommé Nicolas Poulain, Lieutenant de La Prevosté de l'Isle de France, Fort Remarquable et Veu de Peu de Personnes, Sortant Du Cabinet Du Roy, Qui Contient Toute La Quintessence de La Ligue, Depuis Le 2 Janvier, 1585 Jusqus Au Jour Des Barricades, Escheues Le 12 Mai, 1588. La Quelle Le Feu Roy Tiroit Journellement de Ceste Homme, Qui Avoit Une Double Intelligence Dans Paris, sans Que Le Pauvre Prince Y Peust Ou Voulust Donner Ordre, En Estant Empesché de plus Hault, Comme Il Est à Supposer.," in *Recueil de Diverses Pieces Servans a l'Histoire de Henry III. Roy de France et de Pologne ; Dont Les Tiltres Se Trouvent En La Page Suivante.* (A Cologne: chez Pierre du Marteau, 1660), https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9735941x/f163.item.r. He was recruited by the lieutenant procureur Jean Leclerc to Saturday, May 14, 1588, and therefore personally engaged in this conspiracy from its beginning to its end. Poulain's account will be compared with Henry III's account and Jacques-Auguste de Thou's account.

[27]Stuart Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers: The Guise family and the making of Europe*. (England: Oxford University Press, 2011). 279. Carroll raises this view without listing out supporting evidence.

examination of Guise's subsequent promotion to lieutenant-general, Espinac's advice on Guise's return to the court, and the duel between Guise's retainer and Henry III's mignon in 1578.[28]

This paper, combining Montaigne's insights in the *Essais* with a detailed examination of nobility's decisions and actions during the Wars of Religion, is also partly grounded within a re-evaluation of the historiography of early modern French nobility and engages with the scholarly work of Kristen B. Neuschel and Brian Sandberg. This adds new dimensions to their foundational work and deepens our understanding of the relationship between noble culture and civil violence in early modern France. Neuschel examines the nobility as a culture rather than as an institution of the state, arguing that viewing the nobility as the latter is a misleading premise for understanding the sixteenth-century nobility.[29] In other words, the sixteenth-century monarchy or royal authority had not yet obtained a monopoly over the legitimacy and authority of power. Following this logic, Neuschel suggests the confrontational behavior and the resort to arms were ingrained within the persona and life of nobles at the time.[30] More recently, Sandberg's study of early seventeenth-century warrior nobles in Languedoc and Guyenne suggests that these southern nobles embraced violence as a way of life to advance their political

[28]Espinac's letter to Guise in July 1588, see David Potter and Jeremy Black, *The French Wars of Religion : Selected Documents* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 204-5. The duel of the mignons, see Michel de Montaigne's comment and Pierre de l'Estoile's account.

[29]Kristen Brooke Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (NCROL, 1989), x, 16. Neuschel rejects the clientele model to describe and analyze the noble relationships but treats them as independent actors. She locates "the motives for nobles' political behavior within a warrior culture that was still materially and psychologically independent of the state."

[30]Neuschel, *Word of Honor*, 202.

and religious goals throughout civil warfare.[31] Both Neuschel and Sandberg have identified the warrior nobility's culture, molded by their experiences and roles in civil conflicts, as a key driver of their violent practices. However, Michel de Montaigne's observations provide a broader cultural perspective, highlighting that this violent noble culture was not merely defined by their engagement in civil strife but was also deeply rooted in the early education, upbringing, and socialization of young aristocratic boys. Expanding upon Montaige's insights, the two case studies of noble violence explore the impact of gendered aspects of valor, honor, and violence (in warrior noble culture) on aristocratic behavior in the Wars of Religion. Alongside Sandberg's findings on masculinity and honor culture in the seventeenth century, this research suggests a continuity in the cultural frameworks that shaped noble violence (or the manners in which warrior nobility expressed these gendered noble ideals) from the sixteenth century through the early seventeenth century.[32]

The current paper reinforces Neuschel's argument regarding the interplay between noble culture and royal state. Neuschel notes that historians tend to "picture the state as the central or crowning figure in a diagram of power relations, a reference point from which distance can be measured and power thereby calculated."[33] Her observation of the historiographical trend

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[31]Brian Sandberg, *Warrior Pursuits: Noble Culture and Civil Conflict in Early Modern France*, 1st ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), xvi, 285. Sandberg argues that "southern French nobles engaged in warrior pursuits — social and cultural practices of violence designed to raise personal military forces and to engage in civil warfare in order to advance various political and religious goals."

[32]Sandberg, *Warrior Pursuits*, 151-175. Sandberg focuses on the conceptions of honor (as sanctity, quality, reputation, and precedence) and their connections to the practices of military commands. He also notes that courage served as the basis of honor and command, since warrior nobles relied on proof of courage to justify their honorable status and to gain increased honor. While aligning with Sandberg's view, Montaigne focused more on the concept of valor and its relation to honor and the pursuit of rank and reputation.

[33]Neuschel, *Word of Honor,* 17.

suggests that analyzing noble actions and motives solely through the perspective of the monarchy tend to underestimate or omit the existing sense of noble autonomy that influenced their actions during this period. By treating nobility as independent actors, Neuschel argues that Protestant warrior nobles in Picardy during the Wars of Religion did not perceive themselves primarily in terms of the state but saw power, legitimacy, and authority emanating directly from themselves.[34] This means that they perceived themselves through their cultural self-image that legitimized their right to violence. Current analysis of the massacre of Vassy and the Day of the Barricades suggest that the participating Catholic noblemen's violent practices were expressions of their cultural self-representation. It illustrates that these Catholic nobles, like their Protestant counterparts, viewed violence as an essential component of their masculine and noble identities and as a means to assert their autonomy and power and influence within the broader socio-political landscape at the time. By treating the nobility as independent actors, this paper emphasizes the need to understand their actions and motives in terms of their cultural identity.

In situating this research within the broader historiographical debate on the relationship between the nobility and the royal state, it aligns with revisionist historians who reject the traditional conflict model. The traditional nobility-against-monarchy paradigm has been used by many historians to explain the development of absolutist monarchy and modern state at the expense of noble power.[35] This perspective can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville, who

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[34]Neuschel, *Word of Honor,* 16-18.

[35]Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et La Révolution*, AOJB (1856; repr., Monee, IL, USA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2024). David Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism* (London: Arnold, 1990). Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: La noblesse française et la gestation de l'État moderne (1559-1661)* (1989; repr., Fayard, 2014).

contends that the centralization of administration came at the cost of noble power.[36] He suggests the nobility as a group was subdued and undermined during the process of centralization and modernization in the ancien régime. Historians David Parker and Arlette Jouanna have interpreted the role of nobility during the Wars of Religion through this lens, highlighting either their opportunistic grab for power or their defensive stance against royal encroachment on their privileges and authority.[37] However, revisionist historians James B. Collins, Jay Smith, and William Beik emphasize the resilience and adaptability of the warrior nobility, demonstrating that the noble-monarchy interactions were more complex and mutually influential than mere conflicts and antagonism.[38] Current research suggests that noble violence (recorded in the Massacre of Vassy and the Day of the Barricades) was primarily aimed at the construction and

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[36]Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et La Révolution*, AOJB (1856; repr., Monee, IL, USA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2024), 136-137.

[37]David Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism* (London: Arnold, 1990). Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: La noblesse française et la gestation de l'État moderne (1559-1661)*. Noble revolts primarily include the conspiracy of Amboise, the malcontent revolt of 1574-76, and the rebellions of the Catholic League. Historian David Parker underscores how the king's failure to eliminate factions constituted the crisis of the sixteenth century and marked a setback in the progress of absolutism. As the factions vied for the control of the government and the king was unable to effectively control his magnates, the reformation movement fell out of royal hands and partly dominated by open factional strife. Historian Arlette Jouanna, with a focus on noble mentality, contends that the nobility perceived themselves as the guardian of the body politic and the noble revolts against the crown during the Wars of Religion were a reaction to the French monarch's attempt to expand his power in an absolutist direction and/or limit the power of the nobility.

[38]James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). William Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Jay M Smith, *Nobility Reimagined* (Cornell University Press, 2018). Collins, for example, explores how the nobility adapted to and even supported state centralization efforts when it aligned with their interests. Beik highlights instances of negotiation between nobles and the monarchy. Smith suggests a reinterpretation of traditional noble values such as honor and service to fit the new patriotic and nationalistic framework in the eighteenth century.

preservation of personhood. The decisions and actions of the Guises, driven by the reinforcement of noble identity and the pursuit of violent masculinity, were not intended to undermine the monarchy but rather to navigate and shape their roles as aristocracy within its framework during a period of upheavals.

The limitations of this proposed project should be acknowledged. My evaluation of the two violent episodes is constrained by the limited number and reliability of the sources. François de Guise's account is the only direct account of the massacre of Vassy. A comparison of Guise's account with the Protestant account (based on the testimonies of the surviving Protestants) helps to construct a more balanced understanding of the massacre at Vassy. Nicolas Poulain's account is the only direct and comprehensive contemporary source about the Catholic League's plan leading up to the Day of the Barricades. While the private diary has some credibility, we cannot guarantee the accuracy of his understanding of this event. A comparison of Poulain's account with Pierre de l'Estoile's account helps to mitigate the potential bias.

Michel de Montaigne on the aristocratic culture of violence

According to Montaigne, young aristocratic boys in sixteenth-century France were brought up in a cultural milieu where confrontations and acts of violence were not only normalized but also deliberately fostered. He observed that,

> It is pastime for mothers to see a child twist a chicken's neck and enjoy injuring a dog or a cat; and such a father is so foolish as to take it as a good sign of a martial soul, when he sees his son cruelly beat a peasant or a servant who does not defend himself, and some malicious dishonesty and deception.[39]

Montaigne's observation indicated that the aggressive tendencies of French nobility were not as

[39]Montaigne, "De la coštume et de ne changer aisément une loy recüe," 137: "c'ešt passetemps aux meres de veoir un enfant tordre le col à un poulet, et s'esbatre à blesser un chien et un chat; et tel pere ešt si sot de prendre à bon augure d'une ame martiale, quand il voit son fils gourmer ingurieusement un païsant ou un laquay qui ne se defend point, et à quelque malicieuse desloyauté et tromperie."

spontaneous and intrinsic as posited by Elias Norbert, but deliberately fostered by their parents from a very early age. This parental attitude could partly be elucidated by the father's effort to instill the "martial soul" in his sons. This glorification of martial spirit justified the right to inflict violence. Montaigne noted this troublesome trend of his era wherein it was not moral integrity that was valued, but rather the embodiment of violent characteristics that aristocratic families sought to cultivate. Ethical considerations regarding the use of violence seemed to be disregarded, as cruel acts towards animals and insults directed at the undefended and the weaker were seen as indicators of a strong character. Montaigne warned of the consequences of allowing such violent inclinations to grow freely that "these are, however, the true seeds and roots of cruelty, of tyranny, of betrayal: they germinate there, and then rise up gallantly, and profit by force in the hands of custom."[40] Montaigne condemned the immorality of the terrible practices endorsed by aristocratic fathers in boys of an early age. His condemnation suggested a broad cultural acceptance and perpetuation of violent practices in France.

Montaigne indicated that this ethos of violence was deeply grounded in the French nobility, particularly their cult of valor. He maintained that "in our usage, when we say a man who is very valuable, or a good man, in the style of our court and our nobility, that is to say nothing other than a valiant man."[41] Montaigne's adoption of the phrase, "in the style of our court and our nobility," suggested the existence of a prevalent culture within the aristocracy,

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[40]Montaigne, "De la coštume et de ne changer aisément une loy recüe," 137: "ce sont pourtant, les vrayes semences et racines de la cruauté, de la tyrannie, de la trahison: elles se germent là, et s'eslevent apres gaillardement, et profittent à force entre les mains de la couštume."

[41]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 421: "à notre usage, quand nous disons un homme qui vaut beaucoup, ou un homme de bien, au štile de noštre court et de nostre noblesse, ce n'est à dire autre chose qu'un vaillant homme."

where valor, or bravery, was highly prized and was perceived as a fundamental attribute of worthiness and goodness for the nobility. Moreover, Montaigne conveyed that "our nation gives valor the first degree of virtues, as its name shows, which comes from value."[42] Montaigne's reflection elevated the quality of "valor" not only as a virtue, something intrinsically good and desirable to possess, but also as "the first degree of virtues," emphasizing its primacy and paramount importance within French society. By tracing the etymology of "valor" to "value," Montaigne revealed that the essence of valor was traditionally associated with one's inherent worth.

The warrior nobility best embodied the cultural ideal of valor in sixteenth-century France. In describing this military profession, Montaigne places special emphasis on their use of force — "they derived the general term of virtue from the etymology of force" and articulates that "the proper, only, and essential form of nobility in France is the military profession."[43] In other words, the military profession, or warrior nobility in sixteenth-century France, was closely associated with the use of force and the demonstration of valor. This association could be traced back to the medieval period where the nobility had been a warrior caste and acquired their noble titles through military accomplishments.[44] If the use of force was a virtue for the warrior nobility,

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[42]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 421: "noštre nation donne à la vaillance le premier degré des vertus, comme son nom montre, qui vient de valeur."

[43]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 421: "la generale appellation de vertu prend chez eux etymologie de la force" and "la forme propre, et seule, et essentielle, de noblesse en France, c'est la vocation militaire."

[44]Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility: 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Dewald discusses how the ideals of chivalry and the social role of nobility were associated with military prowess and valor. During the Renaissance, there had already been a resurgence of the medieval noble ideals such as valor, loyalty, and personal honor, which constituted central attributes of nobility. Demonstration of martial skills and engagement in combat served as key signs of high social status and noble honor.

then their demonstration of bravery and courage through military prowess was a crucial aspect that justified their role and status as nobility. The warrior nobility's commitment to this military virtue became a key element in maintaining their esteemed position with (the hierarchy of) the aristocracy.

Montaigne's reflection upon the warrior nobility suggested an aristocratic culture that perpetuated violence by making military valor honorable and desirable to the French nobility. He noted that,

> It is very likely that the first virtue that appeared among men and which gave advantage to one over others, was this one, by which the strongest and bravest made themselves masters over the weaker, and acquired a special rank and reputation, from which has remained this language of honor and dignity.[45]

Montaigne observed how French soldiers derived their "honor and dignity" from "rank and reputation." "Rank" likely referred to his discussion at the beginning of the same essay about military awards — the Order of Saint Michel and the Order of Holy Ghost.[46] They represented not only a royal recognition of the soldiers' excellent military service but also about an elevation of status within noble ranks or a social ascendency into the aristocratic circle of knights. It was an honor, an acknowledgment of their valor in the military tasks. As the soldiers rested their "honor and dignity" onto such military awards, they internalized violence as an indispensable way to demonstrate their worth. This pursuit of valor and the resulting social recognition

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[45]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 421-422: "Il ešt vray semblable que la premiere vertu qui se soit fait paroištre entre les hommes et qui a donné advantage aux uns sur les autres, çà ešté cette cy, par laquelle les plus forts et courageux se sont redu maištres des plus foibles, et ont aquis reng et reputation particuliere, d'où luy ešt demeuré cet honneur et dignité de langage."

[46]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur,418-419.

reinforced a culture where martial prowess was paramount and thereby entrenched violence as a fundamental aspect of noble life.

This same passage also reflected how aristocratic pursuit of social status and reputation constituted an integral part of their identity. Montaigne noticed the existence of a hierarchical structure of power among the warrior nobility, with the military virtue of valor serving as the determinant factor that conferred superiority upon some over the other. The stronger and more courageous noblemen were not only able to assert dominance but also to acquire rank and reputation. This observation implied that the military noblemen perceived their power as inherent in their social status and reputation, the pursuit of which suggests competitions for external validation and thereby a constant need to display one's bravery and courage. In this way, the practice of engaging in battles and violent clashes became a means to assert their aristocratic identity and solidify their status.

Montaigne's views were complemented by Blaise de Monluc, a marshal of France during the Wars of Religion, who suggested that social status and reputation were closely connected to his display of bravery. When reflecting upon the duty of a Captain (the leader of a military unit), Monluc conveyed that,

> And if you save yourself by fleeing, be assured that you will place such a mark upon your forehead that it will be very difficult ever to remove it. At the very least, you will need to risk your life at all hazards to erase the bad reputation you will have acquired.[47]

According to Monluc, fleeing from battle tarnishes a warrior nobility's reputation, marking him with a stigma that was nearly impossible to erase. This mark of cowardice was so profound that

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[47]Blaise de Monluc and Florimond de Raemond, *Commentaires de Messire Blaise de Monluc, Maréchal de France ; Blasi Monluci, Franciae Mareschalli, Tumulus...*, *Gallica.bnf.fr*, 4-5: "Et si vous vous sauvez en fuyant, asseurez vous, que vous mettez un tel signal en votre front, qu'il sera bien difficile de jamais l'oster, à tout le moins, qu'il ne faille que vous hazardiez à tous perils votre vie, pour effacer la mauvaise reputation, que vous aurez acquise."

only by risking one's life in future perils can a nobleman hope to restore his honor. Monluc's emphasis on the dire consequences of fleeing from battle illustrated how deeply ingrained the expectation of bravery was in the noble culture. The necessity to continuously prove one's valor in order to maintain or restore one's reputation reflected the external pressure on warrior nobility to embody these martial virtues and the dependency of noble male honor upon external validation, namely his reputation. Monluc's perspective aligns closely with Montaigne's view that valor and martial prowess were fundamental to the identity and social status of the warrior nobility. Monluc highlighted that a nobleman's reputation was built upon his courage and ability to face danger without retreat.

Montaigne specifically pointed out that the pursuit of valor, rank, and reputation for warrior nobility was essential not only to their noble status but also to their masculine identity. Montaigne employs a gendered metaphor likening the "valor" of the nobleman to "the chastity of women," which "also means that a good woman, a woman of worth, and a woman of honor and virtue, is in effect nothing else for us but a chaste woman."[48] On the one hand, this comparison serves to emphasize the moral value associated with both valor and chastity. Just as chastity was valued as a virtue to women, valor is likewise esteemed as a virtue to men. On the other hand, Montaigne's metaphor underscored the gendered nature of the quality of valor. Just as daughters were expected to preserve their chastity until marriage, aristocratic men were expected to display courage on the battlefield. In equating valor with a quality traditionally associated with femininity, Montaigne highlighted the masculine quality inherent in it. If women's reputation and honor were related to their sexual behavior, Montaigne conveyed that men's martial

[48]Montaigne, "Des récompenses d'honneur," 422: "valliance," "la chašteté des femmes," "fait aussi qu'une bonne femme, une femme de bien et femme d'honneur et de vertu, ce ne soit en effeć t à dire autre chose pour nous qu'une femme chašte."

prowess, which determined their reputation and honor, was similarly intertwined with their sexual capability. The pursuit of valor was thereby not only a social expectation towards warrior nobility that affected their social status and reputation but could also have been a gendered expectation, forming a crucial aspect of their male identity.

Montaigne's documentations and insights about the nobility of his time found their echo in the two violent episodes during the Wars of Religion, the massacre of Vassy and the Day of the Barricades. A close examination of relevant primary sources suggest that the motives, decisions, and aggressive behavior of François de Guise and Henri de Guise, as well as their aristocratic followers, aligned with Montaigne's perception of military nobility and its conception of virtue.

The Massacre of Vassy

On March 2 1562, François, the duke of Guise, accompanied by his brother Cardinal de Guise, Jacques de la Montaigne, Jacques de la Brosse, and his entire gendarme company entered the town of Vassy and marched towards the Church to hear Mass.[49] However, on the way, they diverted their course to visit a Protestant gathering. This sudden change of mind triggered the infamous massacre of Vassy. Historian R.J. Knecht frames it as a formal military action between Protestants and Catholics during a period of escalating tensions. Conversely, historian Mack Holt emphasizes the socio-political dimension, connecting the massacre to the political crisis of 1559-1562 and the power struggles following the death of François II. Scrutiny of Guise's account suggests that, despite Guise's attempt to frame the massacre as a defense of Catholicism and royal authority, his underlying motive was to reassert his own authority as a feudal lord and a

[49]Crespin, *Histoire des martyres*, 200-202.

military commander.[50] Insults to his personal honor and the perceived defiance from the Protestants in his domain, as also bolstered by the Protestant account, compelled him to act decisively.[51] The brutal suppression of the Protestant assembly served both as immediate retribution and a broader assertion of his noble status. The subsequent events, including Guise's march to Paris and the rapturous reception he received, further underscore his intent to bolster his reputation and consolidate his power.

Both Mark Holt and R.J. Rnecht interpret the Massacre of Vassy as the first salvo of the civil (or religious) wars in France. According to Knecht, the massacre took place when François, duke of Guise, was returning from his meeting with the duke of Württemberg, during a period when both Catholics and Calvinists were seeking foreign financial and military aid.[52] Knecht contextualizes the massacre within the religious background and suggests the massacre as a trigger for the formal military actions between the Protestants and the Catholics during a period of escalating religious tension. This massacre marked a watershed moment in the evolution of the religious conflicts from the previously recurring localized incidents and skirmishes into the large-scale deliberate attack of Protestant civilians by the Catholic military, which led to the outbreak of the First Religious War in France. Holt adds a socio-political dimension by connecting the massacre of Vassy with the political crisis from 1559 to 1562. Holt traces the massacre back to the reign of François II when François, duke of Guise and Lorraine, Cardinal of Guise, were in power and then the dismissal of the Guises from the center of political power

[50]*Mémoires de Condé*, 119-122.

[51]Crespin, *Histoire des Martyres*, 202-203.

[52]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598*, 34.

immediately after the death of Français II.[53] During the subsequent reign of Charles IX, the regent Catherine de Medici attempted to heal the religious division between the Catholics and the Protestants through the Colloquy of Poissy and the Edict of January.[54] Catherine's moderate stance not only marked a breach of royal tradition to uphold the Gallican principles but also implied an attempt to curb Guises' influence on the young king. Her release of the prince of Condé from prison and appointment of the king of Navarre as the lieutenant-general of the realm further positioned the Guises as her adversaries.[55] Holt highlights the tension between Guises' struggle for domination over the royal power and Catherine's efforts to balance different noble factions to maintain the independent course of the crown as the preconditions of the massacre of Vassy.

Both historians debate over who initiated the massacre of Vassy without delving much into its cause. Knecht briefly summarizes the different perspectives on the cause of the massacre, with the Protestants accusing Guise of starting the massacre and Guise claiming that the Huguenots first pelted him and his men with stones.[56] Instead of probing further into the causes of the massacre, Knecht argues that "the truth will never be known" and instead emphasizes the consequences of the massacre — it was hailed as a triumph for the duke's supporters in France, nullified Catherine de Medici's previous efforts for peaceful solution, and led to the Huguenots'

[53]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 41-45.

[54]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 46-47.

[55]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 44, 46. The prince of Condé was clearly implicated in the Amboise Conspiracy in 1560, an overt Protestant attempt to liberate the young Français II from Guise's influences.

[56]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598,* 35.

capture of Orleans.[57] Knecht views the massacre at Vassy as deeply rooted in religious tension and as a catalyst that further inflamed religious antagonism, advancing the religious conflict into the full course of the wars. In contrast, Mack Holt adopts the Protestant perspective of the incident. After analyzing the Guises' advocacy for the suppression of Protestants under François II, Holt asserts that "the first shots were fired by troops of the duke of Guise, as he encountered a group of unarmed Protestants worshiping inside the town of Vassy."[58] This interpretation might stem from his broader examination of the Guises, whom he characterizes as militant Catholics opposed to the Protestants and the Reformed faith. Therefore, it follows naturally that François, duke of Guise, would initiate the violence as an effort to suppress heretical practices. Without delving into the details of the massacre, Holt's brief narrative of the massacre of Vassy serves to bolster his argument about Guise's opposition to Medici's moderate policy (the Edict of January) towards the Protestants.

Their interpretations of the massacre of Vassy is shaped by their broader perspectives on the causes of the Wars of Religion. Knecht emphasizes how religion, particularly religious dissent, moved people to action.[59] Holt proposes instead that "Protestants and Catholics alike in the sixteenth century each viewed the other as pollutants of their own particular notion of the body social, as threats to their own conception of ordered society."[60] While Knecht views religious tensions and antagonisms as the primary drive behind the outbreak of violence and conflicts, Holt situates them within a broader context of socio-political order. Both sides view the

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[57]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598,* 35.

[58]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 42, 48.

[59]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598*, 3-4.

[60]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 2.

other as a danger to their own conception of a well-ordered, harmonious society. This mutual perception of threat contributed to hostility and aggression. Both assume the outbreak of the massacre of Vassy as a spontaneous result during a period of escalating religious tensions and intense political maneuverings.

However, it is worth questioning whether religious antagonism and Guise's opposition to Catherine de Medici's policy of toleration could fully account for Guise's actions during the massacre of Vassy. Was Guise's motives as straightforward as Kecht and Holt suggest? The existence of an aristocratic ethos of violence, highlighted by Montaigne, prompts a re-evaluation that goes beyond the conventional interpretations based on grand narratives and chains of causality and explores the massacre of Vassy from the perspective of noble behavior. By focusing on Guise's specific motives, experiences, and actions, we see that Guise committed the murder of the Protestant civilians at Vassy not solely to defend Catholic traditions but also to reinforce his own authority as a ruling aristocrat and seigneurial lord.

Guise's sudden arrival at the Protestant congregation at Vassy in February 1562 should not be separated from the fact that he was the feudal overlord of Vassy. As a royal town under François, duke of Guise's feudal authority, Vassy witnessed the spread of Protestant worship from the neighborhood of Joinville to its very borders during his absence, a development that his mother brought to his attention in her complaints.[61] The proximity of Protestant community to his domain, suggesting the unchecked spreading of Reformation ideas near his territory, threatened the integrity of François' authority and his ruling capacity as an absentee feudal lord. Part of the responsibility of the feudal lord was to enforce local laws, administer justice, and maintain order within the seigneury. The lord's status and reputation depended in part on his

[61]Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers*, 6.

ability to manage those who lived in his seigneury. The infiltration and incubation of Reformation ideas in Vassy, the traditionally Catholic and royal town, would signal a weakening of his influence and control. This, combined with the family pressure, urged a decisive response from Guise to the Protestants at Vassy. Thus, Guise's visit at the Protestant assembly, though a surprising gesture arising out of the context of religious warfare, was a conventional exercise of his duties as a ruling aristocrat.

In this context, François de Guise justified the brutal killing of civilians by arguing this violence upheld the order and law of the monarchy. According to his mémoire,

> [...] they would realize how far they have strayed from the duty they were bound to, and how little respect they had for the obedience they owed to the King, because of the rebellions, seditions, and insolences, which they had used not long before towards some Prelates of this Kingdom, without my wanting to otherwise interfere with the matter of their said Religion, except in what would have been solely also contrary to the Ordinances and Commands of His Majesty.[62]

François portrayed him and his men as victims of an unprovoked and violent resistance. As his initial attempt to communicate with the attendants was met with resistance, Guise was compelled to order his men to fight back. According to François, this retaliation was a necessary act of self-defense and a reaction to immediate threat. This response was consistent with the value of the warrior nobility: any challenge to a nobleman's authority had to be met with decisive and often violent actions to maintain respect. The fierce resistance from the Protestants, such as throwing stones and using firearms, could be perceived as a rebellion against the established authority and

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[62] *Mémoires de Condé*, 120: "[...]ils congneussent combien ils se forvoient du devoir auquel ils estoient tenus, & le peu de respeć qu'ils avoient à l'obéissance qu'ils devoient porter au Roy, pour les rébellions, séditions & insolences, dont encores peu auparavant ils avoient usé envers aucunes Prélats de ce Royaume, sans me vouloir autrement empêcher du faiće de leurdiće Religion, sinon en ce qui eust esté seulement aussi contraire aux Ordonnances & Commandements de Sa Majesté."

as a kind of defiance of the lower-status individuals against the upper class that had to be redressed through the noble use of force.

Despite François' justification of self-defense, a close examination of Guise's account suggests the insults towards the Guises' authority as the immediate cause for massacre committed by him and his aristocratic entourages. After sending several of his *gentilshommes* to convey his desire to speak with those in the Protestant convocation in the barn, François recalled that,

> "No sooner was the door where the said Assembly was taking place partially opened, all of a sudden with an impetuous resistance, those inside came to close it again, and to push back those whom I had sent, very roughly with great stone blows, of which they had a good supply, and the largest ones, from a high scaffold that they had erected at the entrance of the gateway with those stones, and others firing their Muskets and Pistols at me and my people, [...][63]

François portrayed him and his men as victims of an unprovoked and violent resistance. As his initial attempt to communicate with the attendants was met with "an impetuous resistance," Guise was compelled to order his men to fight back. According to François, this retaliation was a necessary act of self-defense and a reaction to immediate threat. This response was consistent with the value of the warrior nobility. The cultural context of the time reinforced the idea that any challenge to a nobleman's authority had to be met with decisive and often violent actions to maintain respect. Thus, Guise's view of self-defense reflected the aristocratic cultural ethos where the use of violence was often associated with the defense of honor and dignity. The fierce resistance from the Protestants, such as the actions of throwing stones and using firearms, could

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[63]*Mémoires de Condé*, 120: "ne leur fut si-tost la porte ou estoit ladićte Assemblée, entre-ouverte, que toute soudain par une impétueuse résistence, ceulx de dedans ne vinsent à la refermer, & à repousser ceulx que je leur avoie envoyer, si rudement à grands coups de pierre dont ils avoient une bonne provision, & des plus grosses, sur un hault eschaffault qu'ils avoient dresse à l'entrée du portail de ladićtes pierres, & autres tirans leurs Harquebuses & Pistolets sur moy & les miens, [...]."

be perceived as a rebellion against the established authority and as a kind of defiance of the lower-status individuals against the upper class. This perceived insult marked a direct challenge to François' authority as a ruling aristocrat. Thus, the subsequent offensive attack and brutal killing on the part of the Catholics was both a punishment for them and a means to reassert the status and authority of the Catholic nobility.

Interpreting the Protestant narrative from the Catholic perspective offers a fresh angle into understanding Guise's actions and motive. Guise's aim to eradicate the Protestants was closely associated with the maintenance of social order and reinforcement of aristocratic authority in his domain. The Church and the nobility had been mutually supportive institutions where the Church provided spiritual legitimacy to the secular rule of the nobility and the nobility protected and promoted the interests of the Church.[64] This relationship ensured that religious authority bolstered the nobility's political power and vice versa. However, Protestantism, with its emphasis on justification by faith alone and rejection of scriptural authority, posed a direct threat to the Church's dominance. By ruthlessly targeting and eliminating those identified as Huguenots, François was able to uphold and even reinforce his authority as aristocratic feudal lord, who was expected to maintain religious and social order within their territories.

Although the Protestant account depicts those attending the Protestant assembly as innocent victims persecuted by the unruly Catholic forces commanded by the Duke of Guise, this narrative also subtly hints at the provocations of the Catholic nobility by Protestants. The Protestant account characterized the sudden visit of the Guises and their followers to the barn as

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[64]Ernst H Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy,*1: 316, 323. Mousnier notes that the clergy frequently recruited its members from the nobility, with bishops and archbishops in the provinces typically coming from various noble ranks, ranging from peers of France and princes of the blood to nobles with feudal rights.

a Catholic conspiracy for pillage and murder and highlighted the excessive violence of the Catholic army against unarmed civilians. However, the author, Jean Crespin, asserted this conspiracy solely based on circumstantial evidence. This depiction of unarmed civilians also becomes questionable after a comparison with the Guise account. The religious persecutions of the wine vendor, described from the Protestant perspective, reflected a clear intent on the part of Guise to reassert control by imposing punishments upon those deviating from Catholic orthodoxy and disrupting the social order. For example,

> The first one they encountered was a poor wine vendor who was in front of the barn door, to whom they asked if he was a Huguenot and in whom he believed? Having answered that he believed in Jesus Christ, they gave him two great sword thrusts through the body, from which he fell stunned.[65]

Upon declaring his faith in Jesus Christ, the vendor was brutally attacked. For the Catholics, his declaration of faith, identified with Protestantism, represented a bold act of defiance against the Catholic Church and its doctrines. François de Guise, a prominent Catholic leader, along with his brother, Cardinal Lorraine de Guise, wielded influence not only through François' rule as a feudal lord but also through the ecclesiastical power of the Cardinal. Their authority was intricately linked to the maintenance of Catholic hegemony, the foundation of their political and social power. The wine vendor's words and the broader participation of citizens in such a religious assembly could have been perceived as a threat to this hegemony. By punishing deviations from Catholic orthodoxy, the Guises aimed to quell these challenges and reinforce the existing social structure, which in turn supported their aristocratic dominance. In this context, Guise's suppression of Protestantism and the perceived Huguenots was crucial not simply for

[65]Crespin, *Histoire Des Martyres*, 202: "Le premier qui fut par eux rencontré estoit un provre Crieur de vin qui estoit au devant la porte de la grange, auquel ils demanderent s'il estoit pas Huguenot & en qui il croyoit? Ayant respondu qu'il croyoit en Jesus Christ, lui donnerent deux grands coups d'espee à travers le corps, dont il fut atterré."

religious conformity but as a means of maintaining political and social influence that underpinned the Guises' authority. The attack on the wine vendor thereby symbolizes a broader effort by the Guises to stifle any opposition that could potentially weaken their control.

Another prime example of this reassertion of control was the confrontation between the Protestant Minister and the Guises. In spite of the Minister's commitment to spreading the Gospel rather than inciting social unrest, Guise insisted that the Calvinist Minister was the seducer who led the people of Vassy astray and fostered resistance against the local Catholic authority.[66] The Duke's reaction to the Minister, accusing him of causing the deaths and demanding his immediate execution, reflects how the influence of the Protestant leader was seen as direct provocations to the Catholic nobility, challenging their religious and social control. The Minister's presence symbolized an encroachment of Protestant community into Guise's ruling domain.

The massacre of Vassy provided a testing ground for the Catholic nobility to showcase their valor and military prowess, which not only demonstrated their long-standing commitment to their religious duties but also reflected deeper layers of personal ambition and self-fashioning as illustrated in Guise's account. Nobility's military ethos had long been intertwined with Catholicism and this connection could be traced back to their religious duty in the Crusades.[67]

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[66]Crespin, *Histoire Des Martyres*, 203: "le Duc, sortant avec son frère le Cardinal, lui demanda: « Vien-ça, es-tu le Ministre d'ici, qui te fait si hardi de séduire ce peuple?» «Monsieur, » dit le Ministre, « je ne suis point seducíeur, car j'ai presché l'Evangile de Jesus Christ.» Le Duc, sentant que ceste simple & briesue response condamnoit son entreprise, commença à maugréer, en disant: «Mort Dieu, L'Evangile presche-il sedition? Tu es cause de la mort de toutes ces gens; tu seras pendu tout maintenant. Ça, Prevost, qu'on dresse une potence pour pendre ce bougre.» Cela dit, le Ministre fut livré entre les mains des laquais, qui l'outragerent de toutes façons."

[67]Richard W Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41-87.

Given the historical precedent set by the Crusades, which aimed to check the spread of Islam, the massacre of Vassy could have been similarly viewed as an effort to suppress the expansion of Protestantism, marking the onset of a new crusade against heresy. In his account, François de Guise conveyed that, "I myself received three blows, which, however, were not so severe (thank God) because I only felt them a little in one arm, which was not of any importance."[68] His personal experience during the massacre reflected a deliberate effort of self-fashioning. By emphasizing that he received three blows yet only felt them "a little in one arm," Guise downplays the severity of his injuries and crafts a heroic image of himself. The courage and bravery in the face of physical attack highlights his role as a valiant military commander willing to confront the danger and sacrifice his life in defense of the Catholic faith. This account not only reinforced his leadership (as the military leader of Catholic nobility) but also aligned with the masculine ideals of valor and strength at the time as suggested by Montaigne.

François' detour to Paris right after the massacre of Vassy further underscored his intention of reinforcing his individual reputation and status even at the expense of the royal authority. As the news of the massacre spread, Protestants demanded justice and Catherine summoned the duke to her residence at Monceaux to answer for his actions, but François **directly** marched on Paris, entering the city on 16 March.[69] Guise's decision to attack the Protestant assembly at the barn had already been a public defiance of the tolerant and moderate ("politique") stance advocated by the royal authority. His visit to Paris further indicated a bold attitude of defiance towards Catherine de Medici. Choosing Paris, a traditional Catholic

[68]*Mémoires de Condé*, 120-121: "J'en receu moy-mesmes trois coups, qui toutefois n'eurent pas si grand-portée (Dieu merci) car je ne m'en suis qu'un peu senti en un bras, qui n'a esté chose d'importance."

[69]Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers*, 162.

stronghold, as a stop reflected Guise's desire to strengthen his reputation and prestige by aligning himself with the city's Catholic orthodoxy to consolidate his support among the Catholic populace and nobility.

Paris transformed into a stage where François could exhibit and affirm his valor and martial prowess. As François de Guise and his troop marched into the city of Paris, the crowds lined the street to view their entry, shouting their joy and hatred of the Huguenots, and the city council pledged 20,000 men and 2 million crowns if he would assume the title of "defender of the faith."[70] The public acclamation signaled both an endorsement of Guise's previous military actions and widespread affirmation of Guise's military role, which further enhanced his reputation for competence and prowess as a military commander. In addition, this military procession was also a performative assertion of power. Michel Foucault argues that power is maintained and reinforced through visibility, where public recognition and the act of being seen affirm authority.[71] In this case, the crowd's enthusiastic reception not only showcased military strength, an essential aspect of noble identity, but also served as a ritual that reinforced his legitimacy and authority. The city council's pledges further underscore the Foucauldian notion that power is constituted through discursive practices. By publicly aligning with François and offering him a title that carried both religious and political weight, the city council actively shaped his aristocratic identity, contributing to the creation and consolidation of his power. The public endorsement and the ceremonial pledges by the city council created a narrative of unity and leadership under his command, effectively manufacturing consent and compliance among the populace and the governing bodies. In this way, the visibility of François' power functioned

[70]Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers*, 162-163.

[71]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 195-230.

both as a confirmation of his aristocratic status and as a mechanism through which his authority was established and his identity as a warrior nobility solidified within the public and political arena.

In summary, the violent clash at Vassy was not simply a direct confrontation between the Protestants and the Catholics, as characterized by Holt and Knecht, or between loyal servants of the state and the rebels, as described by Guise. Instead, they represented a clash between the ruling aristocracy and the ruled peasants. What led to the bloody scene at Vassy in the first place was the lack of respect to Guise, the aristocratic feudal overlord and Catholic nobility, from the perceived Huguenots, who were social inferiors obliged to recognize his authority and obey his order. Guise's response to the perceived insult at Vassy was driven by personal affronts to his dignity but quickly evolved into a broader assertion of his authority and leadership. It was vividly demonstrated during his entry into Paris where his military strength and leadership was showcased and celebrated and his noble status reinforced. This public affirmation of his military capabilities also acted as a reaffirmation of his male honor, which, according to Montaigne, was closely associated with the pursuit of valor, rank, and reputation among warrior nobility. Thus, both the barn at Vassy and the streets of Paris created spaces for Guise, and his fellow aristocrats, to assert and validate their nobility and masculinity through violence and killings. Guise's actions at Vassy, initially driven by personal affronts to his dignity, evolved into a broader assertion of his authority and leadership, reinforced by the public spectacle and recognition he received in Paris. This dual context highlights how Guise utilized violence both as a means of immediate retribution and as a strategic tool to consolidate his power and reinforce his noble status.

The Day of the Barricades

In addition to the Massacre of Vassy, the Day of Barricades on May 12, 1588 marked another pivotal moment of brutal violence during the Wars of Religion. R.J. Knecht, Mark Holt, and J.M. Salmon have relied on the French diarist Pierre de l'Estoile's account to frame this event as a popular uprising. Yet, a detailed examination of Nicolas Poulain's *Le Proceszverbal* challenges this conventional narrative. Poulain's perspective reveals a meticulously orchestrated aristocratic conspiracy led by the Duke of Guise against Henry III. On that morning, the growing public dissatisfaction progressed from the placement of barricades to the unexpected defeat of the royal forces. The ensuing clash between the loyalist troops and the people, however, surprisingly evolved into a demonstration of the duke of Guise's strength and bravery. Subsequently, the duke of Guise transformed the city of Paris from a focal point of rebellion to a venue for him to affirm and exhibit his command and power. Historian Stuart Carroll's speculation of Guise's motive to prove his worth and potentially replace the duke of Épernon, Henry III's male favorite finds additional support when examining the politico-social context, illuminating Guise's ambitions for social status, influence, and prestige. Therefore, the reinterpretation of the Days of Barricade underscores and exemplifies how the Wars of Religion served as a stage for noblemen, particularly the Duke of Guise, to assert and defend their nobility and manhood. This examination also offers a more comprehensive understanding of the Day of Barricade, unraveling the calculated aristocratic maneuvers behind the seemingly spontaneous uprising.

The conventional interpretation of the Day of Barricades as a mere popular uprising against the king Henry III obscures the essential role played by the duke of Guise. R.J. Knetch primarily focuses on king Henry III's perspective and actions and briefly mentions the initial

conflict between Guise and Henry III that sparked the subsequent wider revolt.[72] Mack Holt describes this episode as "the nadir of royal authority in Henry III's reign" and "the revolution in Paris," noting that Guise had been unaware of and independent from this revolution planned by the Sixteen but it allowed Guise's faction and the Sixteen to later seize control of nearly every major institution in the city.[73] Holt's use of "revolution" to denote this event hints at the fundamental change in the political organization in Paris resulting from this uprising. However, both Knecht and Holt base their perspectives of the event on Pierre de l'Estoile account, which captures the event as perceived — a popular uprising — from the viewpoint of a contemporary grounded in its proceedings. Their interpretations were influenced by l'Estoile's partial narrative.

Historian J.M. Salmon aligns with Holt's view on the revolutionary characteristics of this event and takes a step further to assert that the Day of the Barricades constituted a social revolution characterized by class struggles and orchestrated by the Sixteen, a council composed of the representatives from the sixteen quartiers of Paris.[74] By scrutinizing the composition of the Sixteen, Salmon finds that forty-eight members of the Sixteen were heavily weighted towards the middle classes, particularly among the middle and lower ranks of the legal profession, despite including the liaison officers of the two noblemen d'Effiat and Guise.[75] Though the composition of the Sixteen demonstrates the involvement of the middle classes in this governing council, it does not necessarily indicate that they were all aware of and implicated in the Parisian

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[72]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598*, 70-73.

[73]Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 129-131.

[74]J.M. Salmon, "The Paris Sixteen, 1584-94: The Social Analysis of a Revolutionary Movement," *The Journal of Modern History* 44, no. 4 (December 1, 1972), 540.

[75]Salmon, "The Paris Sixteen," 549-551.

conspiracy. Nor does it demonstrate the extent to which the middle class influenced the actual proceeding of the uprising. Though not explicitly stated, Salmon endeavors to prove the independence of the movement from the aristocracy, particularly the duke of Guise, to highlight the class struggles behind this revolution, through the connection of the Council of the Sixteen to the uprising and the dominance of the middle class in that council. Salmon's analysis of the structure of the Sixteen only serves to prove the presence of the lower classes in this council, but not their planning or participation in planning the uprising. Salmon's analysis is anchored primarily upon *Le Dialogue d'entre le Maheustre et le Manant*, a statement from the radical wing of the Sixteen.[76] Using this source, Salmon extrapolates information about the makeup of the Sixteen, underscoring how individuals from various social strata were incorporated and assimilated into the Sixteen, capitalizing on the widespread discontent in Paris during Henry III's reign.

However, Nicolas Poulain's account, the underappreciated primary source, presents a challenge to their interpretations. Poulain offers an insider perspective into the event as he chronicles every move of the conspirators since the day of his recruitment by lieutenant procureur Jean Leclerc to the day (May 14, 1588) he left Paris to join the king in Chartres.[77] His firsthand account unveils the crucial role of the duke of the Guise and other Catholic military nobility in setting up detailed military schemes that set the stage for the Day of the Barricades.

The interpretation of the Day of Barricades as a popular uprising might be attributed to the fact that all three historians overlooked a crucial primary source related to the Day of Barricade, Nicolas Poulain's *Le Proces Verbal*. By drawing upon the testimony of Nicolas

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[76]Salmon, "The Paris Sixteen," 542-547.

[77]Nicolas Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL" (A Cologne: chez Pierre du Marteau, 1660).

Poulain, we are able to understand the aristocratic conspiracy that preceded the Day of Barricades. As early as April 15, nearly half a month before the day of Barricade, Guise's forces, notably his followers and the members of the Catholic League, had started to arrange and deploy themselves in the quartiers of Paris. In the letter to Guise, a member of the League named La Chapelle informed that,

> Instead of the sixteen districts that there were in Paris, divided and separated in five districts: in each district a Colonel was established, under each of said Colonels a number of Captains were established, each of them given a memo of what they had to do, and the place where those who had no weapons could find them.[78]

It was a detailed plan designed to mobilize the entire city of Paris for an armed uprising against Henry III. Having a colonel giving orders to the captains to carry them out ensured the clarity of organization and communication so that there would be no confusion as they carried out their mission. In addition, there was also a detailed step-by-step plan for the day of action:

> [...] from there they would go straight to the Louvre to break the King's Guards and seize the said Louvre, and that the Captains of the city would each hold their district to guard and make barricades, except for three thousand men whom the said leClerc was to lead through the city, to go to the good and fortified houses.[79]

It was revealed that the sack of the royal guards and the siege of Louvre, Henry III's dwelling, were the central objectives of their plan. A likely course of action would be to take Henry III as a hostage in exchange for favorable terms.

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[78]Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL," 182-3: "au lieu de seize quartiers qu'il y avoit à Paris, partie & separée en cinq quartiers: & à chacun quartier estably un Colonnel, depuis soubs chacun desdits Colonnels furent eftablis numbre de Capitaines, à chacun d'eux baillé un memoire de ce qu'ils avoient à faire, & le liue où devoient trouver des armes ceux qui n'en avoient point."

[79]Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL," 184: "[…] que de là ils iroient droict, au Louvre rompre les Gardes du Roy, & se saisir dudit Louvre, & que les Capitaines de laville se tiendroient chacun en son quartier à garder & faire baricades, horsmis trois mil hommes que ledit le Clerc devoit mener par la ville, pour aller aux bonnes & fortes maisons."

The Duke of Guise was revealed as the mastermind behind the conspiracy. In a letter, Guise instructed the League members that, "they should try to increase a greater number of men as they could, and for the rest, they should let him handle it. That they must wait for the opportunity, which he would not let pass when it presented itself.""[80] This letter confirms that Guise not only approved of the conspiratorial plan against Henry III but was also actively pushing for it behind the scene. On April 15, Poulain was informed by his superior LeClerc that "Monsieur de Guise had already sent a number of Captains well experienced in war, lodged in all the districts of Paris, of which His Majesty knew nothing: and there were to come even a greater number."[81] Guise's strategic deployment of experienced war captains within the city of Paris without notifying the king serves as compelling evidence of his active involvement in the conspiracy.

However, this plan was foiled by Poulain, who turned out to be a royal spy. After thoughtful consideration, Poulain revealed the Catholic League's secret plan to the king on April 22.[82] The next day the Leaguers immediately received the news that their plan was spoiled and the fact that "the King had sent for his four thousand Swiss at Lagny, and that he was to lodge them the next day, which was Quasimodo Sunday, in the suburbs of Saint Martin and Saint

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[80]Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL," 179: "ils regardassent de s'accroisire en plus grand nombre d'hommes qu'il pourraient, & du surplus qu'ils l'en laissassent faire. Qu'il falloit attendre la commodité, la quelle il ne laissoit passer quand elle se preseateroit."

[81]Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL," 184: "Monsieur de Guise avoit défia envoyé un nombre de Capitaines bien experimentez à la guerre, logez en tous les quartiers de Paris, dont sa Majesté ne sçavoit rien: & qu'il y en devoit venir encores un plus grand nombre."

[82]Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL," 185-6.

Denis."[83] After being informed of their plan, the king strengthened the royal defense at the spots where they were preparing to enter and attack. Thus, the chance of success would have been slim and engaging in direct confrontation with the royal forces would have required considerable military resources and expenses. Since Poulain ceased to adhere to the League's instruction after disclosing their plan to king Henry III, the actual proceeding of the Day of Barricades can only be reconstructed through Pierre de l'Estoile's account. Thus, it is necessary to revisit l'Estoile account, with a renewed examination and a guided focus on the duke of Guise, in order to comprehend the subsequent course of actions.

On May 12, 1588, popular unrest simmered and escalated from the erection of barricades to the destruction of the royal forces. According to Pierre de l'Estoile's *Mémoires-Journaux*,

> The people, seeing thus all its forces deployed throughout the city, began to stir up, fearing something worse, and murmuring that it had never been seen or heard in Paris that a foreign garrison had been placed there. Upon this, immediately, everyone took up arms, went on guard in the streets and districts, and in no time stretched out the chains and made barricades at the street corners; [...][84]

By tradition, the city of Paris had been granted the special privilege of self-defense.[85] In other words, Paris was supposed to be free of military forces. The sudden presence of the military troops in different parts of the city in the early morning broke this tradition, arousing commotion

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[83]Poulain, "LE PROCEZ VERBAL," 187-8: "le Roy avoit envoyé querir ses quatre-mill Suisses à Lagny, & qu'il les faisoit loger le lendemain, qui estoit le Dimanche de Quafimodo aux faux-bourgs sainct Martin & sainct Denis."

[84]Pierre De L'Estoile and Gustave Brunet, *Mémoires-Journaux de Pierre de L'Estoile: Edition Pour La Première Fois Complète et Entièrement Conforme Aux Manuscrits Originaux* (Livrairie de Bibliophiless, 1875), 139: "Le peule, voiant ansi toutes ses forces disposée par la ville, commença à s'esmouvoir, et craindre quelque chose de pis, et à murmur qu'on n'avoit jamais veu ni oui à Paris qu'on y eust mis une garnison estrangère, Sur ce, incontinent, chacun prend les armes, sort en garde par les rues et cantons, en moins de rien tend les chaisnes et fait barricades aux coins des rues;[……]."

[85]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598*, 70.

and fear among the people that culminated in the barricade. Towards noon, king Henry III realized that he was unable to destroy the barricades and attempted a palliative measure to appease the fury of the rebels; however, by afternoon, the situation worsened as the people began to defy the Swiss and French troops by looks and words and threaten to kill them unless they withdrew.[86] From an atmosphere of self-defense to that of aggression and attack, the confrontation developed to the extent that even the retreat of the royal troops could no longer check their rage. The royalist leaders faced great danger in the face of the crowd that was out of control and overwhelmed by the burst of anger.

However, this tense confrontation between the royalist forces and the populace took an unexpected turn, transforming into a display of the duke of Guise's power and manliness. As the Swiss guards fell to arquebus fire and rocks and stones hurled from the windows by women and children, the duke of Guise, under the urgent request of king Henry III, came to rescue the royal troops and assuage the mass.[87] L'Estoile recorded that,

> Without him, they would all have been dead and not even one would have escaped, as they later recognized and admitted that they owed their lives only to this lord, who begged the people to give them to him: which he did immediately, as the fury of this foolish populace calmed at the mere sound of Guise's voice, so poisoned and infatuated were they with his love.[88]

This passage informed that the royalist army, although it was heavily armed and numerous, would not be able to escape or retreat from the Parisians' encirclement and attack without the

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[86]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598,* 71.

[87]L'Estoile and Brunet, *Mémoires-Journaux*, 140-1.

[88]L'Estoile and Brunet, *Mémoires-Journaux*, 141: " Sans lui, ils estoient tous morts et n'en fust reschappé la queue d'un, comme depuis ils ont recongneu et avoué ne tenir la vie que de ce seingneur, qui pria le peuple de les lui donner: ce qu'il fist tout aussi toust, estant la fureur de ceste sotte populace accoisée au simple son de la voix de Guise, tante elle estoit empoisonnée et assottée de son amour."

help of the duke of Guise. They were on the verge of death. The duke saved the royalist forces from the hands of the Parisians by his own efforts and prevented further bloodshed. His charisma was proved by his courage to intervene in this dangerous moment and his confidence in his capability of resolving this conflict. L'Estoile description about the public reaction to the duke of Guise, as "calmed at the mere sound of Guise's voice" et "poisoned and infatuated were they with his love" was an obvious exaggeration with personal opinion and suggested his bias against the duke. Nonetheless, it indirectly testified to the theatrical effect of the duke of Guise's presence during a moment of tension and conflict. The effectiveness of his presence in calming public sentiment further attested to the duke's leadership and added to his heroic image as a warrior nobility.

Subsequently, the duke of Guise turned the city of Paris from the center of rebellion to a stage for him to validate and showcase his authority. It was noted, "Passing through the streets, it was a contest to see who could shout the loudest: *Long live Guise!* He appeared to be displeased by this, so much so that, lowering his big hat (it is not known if he was smiling underneath), he told them several times: 'My friends, that's enough; Gentlemen, it's too much; shout: *Long live the King*!'"[89] Guise's popularity among the Parisians was vividly embodied in the exclamation of "*Long live Guise*." As reputation constituted a considerable part of noble identity, his aristocratic authority was thereby proved and reinforced by these Parisians' support and recognition of him. The gesture of "baissant son grande chapeau" expressed both a respectful salute to the crowd and a self-validating acknowledgement of their recognition, solidifying the duke's leadership of and

[89]L'Estoile and Brunet, *Mémoires-Journaux*, 142: "Passant par les rues, c'estoit à qui crieroit le plus haut: *Vive Guise!* Ce qu'il vouloir faire paroistre avoir à desplaisir, tellement que, baissant son grande chapeau (on ne sçait s'il rioit dessous), leur dit par plusieurs fois: <<Mes amis, c'est assez; Messieurs, c'est trop; criez: Vive le Roy!>>"

influence over the Parisian people. Though the duke of Guise appeared to humbly redirect the praises towards the monarch and urged the people to proclaim "*Long live the King*," it showed his confidence in steering the public discourse. Guise's popularity in Paris simultaneously underscored Henry III's humiliation and incompetence, as his failure to quell the riot and lack of popular support in Paris stood in stark contrast to the Duke of Guise who won the heart of Parisiens.

The popular uprising and Guise's presence at the site of revolt, upon examination of both Poulain's and L'Estoile's accounts, suggested that the popular uprising was in fact intertwined with and exacerbated by the underlying noble-king tensions. This reevaluation reveals a deeper layer of strategic maneuvering influenced by aristocratic conspiracies against Henry III. The eruption of the popular uprising was not a sudden occurrence but was precipitated by Henry III's decision to send the royal troops into Paris, a move influenced by Poulain's disclosures. This decision was influenced by Poulain's revelation to the king, without which there would not have been royal troops in the city in the first place. Thus, this deployment was a direct response to perceived threats, suggesting that what might seem like a spontaneous popular rebellion was, in fact, a culmination of a series of orchestrated events within aristocratic circles. Furthermore, the tension between the Catholic League, led by Guise, and Henry III had escalated to a critical point by the end of April 1588 (given Poulain's revelation), setting the stage for conflict and confrontation. Following this logic, the arrival of royal troops in Paris can be understood as a defensive measure adopted by Henry III, triggered by his growing suspicions of Guise's intentions. Guise's decision to enter Paris to meet with the Sixteen on May 9, in defiance of Henry III's warnings and orders, might have been the ultimate trigger for Henry III's

introduction of foreign mercenaries into the city.[90] Despite Guise's visible presence in Paris, his direct involvement in the uprising was delayed until Henry III's request for help. The strategic interactions between the noble faction and the crown is a dynamic that has been underexplored in past historical analyses.

Historians Nicolas Le Roux and Stuart Carroll assess Guise's motive within the broader context of the Wars of Religion. Le Roux maintains that the leaguers intended to "se saisir du souverain" by taking advantage of the popular uprising but did not succeed.[91] He built his argument upon the developing tension between Guise and Henry III since 1580s, as well as the power struggle between Henry III's force, the Catholic League, and the Huguenots by the end of 1580s. Le Roux's analysis was based on the perspective of Henry III, which, however, should not be mistaken as reflective of Guise's motive. Historian Stuart Carroll provides an interpretation from Guise's perspective, focusing on Guise's disappointment and disillusionment toward Henry III. In his efforts to confront the strengthened Protestant power by the end of 1587, Guise faced Henry III's stubborn refusal to appoint him as lieutenant-general of the royal armies, and the king further undermined him by breaking his promise to provide reinforcements and funds and disregarding Guise's plan for a decisive strike while negotiating the withdrawal of foreign mercenaries with the Protestants.[92] Consequently, regarding the Day of Barricades, Carroll conjectures that Guise, as well as the leaguers, did not intend to overthrow the monarchy as envisioned and planned by the Sixteen, but more to prove his worth and gain recognition from

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[90]L'Estoile and Brunet, *Mémoires-Journaux*, 135-6.

[91]Nicolas Le Roux, *Un Régicide Au Nom de Dieu. L'assassinat d'Henri III (1er Août 1589)* (Editions Gallimard, 2018), 163.

[92]Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers*, 268-271.

Henry III to replace the king's favorite, the duke of Épernon.[93] A major divergence between Le Roux and Carroll's analysis of Guise's motive was their different views on Henry III-Guise relationship at this moment. While Le Roux viewed their relationship as political opponents, Carroll emphasized Guise's commitment to the Catholic monarchy of France, notwithstanding his political and religious disparities with Henry III.

Though Carroll's analysis revolves around Henry III-Guise relation in understanding Guise's motive, Carroll introduces, or hints at, a more personal aspect involving Guise's self-fashioning. His speculation regarding Guise's intention to prove his worth is buttressed by the preceding close analysis of Guise's action during the Day of Barricades. With the detailed planning of the routes and the strategic positioning of the troops in assigned quartiers in advance, Guise possessed the capability to quell the uprising at its infancy or directly attack the Louver thoroughly exploiting the power vacuum created by the popular unrest. However, he opted to remain inactive until Henry III requested assistance. This deliberate choice implies that his presence could be carefully staged for special purposes — as revealed by l'Estoile's narrative — to display courage and enhance his reputation and public image. Moreover, when considered the broader social context (analyzed by Carroll,) it becomes evident that Guise's motive was more than mere opportunism. Rather, it points to his ambition to showcase his indispensability to the state's operation and to exert pressure on Henry III through popular support. Montaigne identified rank and reputation as two crucial sources from which noblemen derived their honor and dignity, as well as external validations of the nobility's influence and status. Thus, it was likely that the desire for external recognition may have led Guise to act in a manner that risked

[93]Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers*, 279.

undermining the monarch's authority in public, indicating his willingness to prioritize his own image and reputation over the stability of the monarchy.

Guise's intention to prove his worth and supplant Épernon also gains further support through analysis of the social context. After the death of Joyeuse, Henry III's former male favorite, during the battle at Courtras against Navarre in October 1587, Épernon, the reserve, was immediately awarded the prestigious title of the Admiral of France in January 1588.[94] This title not only conferred honor and glory but also indicated actual resources and personnel he could command in reality. Epénon's elevation in military rank may have posed a threat to the duke of Guise's position and power. This notion was reinforced by Guise's promotion to the position of lieutenant-general after negotiation with king Henry III following the Day of Barricades.[95] This advancement reflected his aspiration for recognition and pursuit of authority within the military and noble hierarchy. In addition, Épernon's rise in military rank may have also engendered feelings of resentment and injustice within Guise, given that Épernon was swiftly promoted to the desired title while Guise's continuous and dedicated efforts in combating heresy went unrecognized. This denial of recognition, coupled with the League's failed maneuver, may have wounded Guise's masculine pride and thereby led him to restore his wounded dignity by seeking validation through popular support and public acclaim during the uprising. In this light, Guise's conduct at the site of the uprising served as a manifestation of his commitment to upholding his masculine honor.

Moreover, this animosity could be traced further back to the political rivalry between the Guises and Henry III's mignons. One remarkable event that exemplified this rivalry was the duel

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[94]Le Roux, *Un Régicide Au Nom de Dieu. L'assassinat d'Henri III (1er Août 1589)*, 158-159.

[95]Knecht, *The French Civil Wars, 1562-1598*, 71.

between Henry III's male favorites and Guise's retainers in 1578, later known as the duel of the mignons. It was recorded that on April 27,

> to settle a quarrel that had arisen over a very slight cause the previous day in the courtyard of the Louvre, between Seigneur de Quélus, one of the King's great favorites, and the young Entragues, called Antraguet, a favorite of the House of Guise, the said Quélus with Maugiron and Livarot, and Antraguet with Riberac and the young Chomberg, met at five in the morning at the Horse Market, and there fought so fiercely that the handsome Maugiron and the young Chomberg were left dead on the spot.[96]

This dueling suggested that intensification of factionalism progressed from the royal court to the violence on the streets of Paris. Though the duke of Guise was not personally involved in it, this duel mirrored the antagonism between two groups in the political arena and foreshadowed the increasingly distinct political and ideological differences that would come to characterize these two groups in the mid-1580s. Guise's antagonism towards Épernon could be a continuation of this factional rivalry. Guise, as the leader of the Catholic League, advocated for Catholic interests and opposed the influence of the Protestant factions. Épernon, as well as other mignons, aligned more with the moderate and royalist stance represented by Henry III. The ideological divide placed Guise and his supporters in direct opposition to the mignons. Guise and the League may have viewed the mignons, particularly Épernon who enjoyed royal favor, as an obstacle to their efforts to advance their interests and goals in front of the royal authority.

Apart from political allegiances, this duel functioned as a ritual of noble male honor postured through acts of violence. Dueling had traditionally been perceived as a way to settle male disputes over honor. The violent encounter between the king's favorites and Guise's

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[96]L'Estoile et Brunet, *Mémoires-Journaux*, 248: "pour desmesler une querelle née pour fort légère occasion, le jour précédent, en lar cour du Louvre, entre le seigneur de Quélus, l'un des grans mignons du Roy, et le jeune Entragues, qu'on apeloir Antraguet, favori de la maison de Guise, ledit Quélus avec Maugiron et Livarot, et Antraguet avec Riberac et le jeune Chomberg, se trouvèrent, dès cinq heures du matin, au Marché-aux-Chevaux, et là combattirent si furieusement, que le beau Maugiron et le jeune Chomberg demeurèrent morts, sur la place."

retainers can be interpreted as a performative act where the participants sought to assert their masculine identity and social status. The cause of the duel, described as a "very slight cause," indicates that the actual reason for the confrontation was less important than the opportunity it provided for the noblemen to display their valor and resolve. The duel thereby functioned as a public stage for enacting and reaffirming the values of courage, loyalty, and martial prowess. The fatalities of Maugiron and Chomberg, alongside the grave injuries of the other participants, emphasized the high risks involved in these confrontations and the unwavering resolve of these noblemen to defend their honor. By engaging in such deadly combat, the noblemen involved were not only settling personal grievances but were also strengthening their positions within their respective factions and the broader aristocratic society.

This ritual function is further supported by Montaigne's observation about dueling. Montaigne observed a shift in the tradition in sixteenth-century France, where duelers were allowed to bring along seconds and supporters to the duel, and criticized this new tradition as "an image of cowardice."[97] If the escalation of a minor verbal quibble to physical confrontation between Guise's retainer and Henry III's mignons was driven by perceived slights to their respective honor, then dueling could be perceived as a way for nobility to reclaim their dignity and reputation within society. By drawing on external support to ensure victory, they demonstrated a desperation to safeguard their honor and valor and a fear of being perceived as a coward and losing respect. This view is bolstered by Montaigne who noted that the function of the seconds were no longer to "guard against irregularity and foul play" and "bear witness to the outcome of the combat" and criticized the "injustice" and "baseness" of the action of "engaging

[97]Montaigne, "Couardise mere de la cruauté," 779. "C'ešt aussi une image de lacheté qui a introduit en nos combats singuliers cet usage de nous accompaigner de seconds, et tiers, et quarts. C'eštoit anciennement des duels; ce sont, à cette heure, rencontres et batailles."

another valor and strength than your own in the protection of your honor."[98] The function of the seconds shifted from a trusted representative that reconciled the parties without violence to an element of escalated violence and confrontations between the duelers. Yet what concerned Montaigne was not the spiral of violence but the ethical degradation of this action. For Montaigne, honor should be defended by one's own actions and capabilities, not by involving others. The involvement of multiple parties masked cowardice under the guise of increased formality and spectacle and marked a departure from true courage. His reflection underlined how the defense of honor was central to duelers and characterized what it meant to be a nobleman. The confrontations between Quélus and Antraguet suggested the need to defend noble manhood as a crucial motivation of aristocratic violence. This highlights that, despite the clientele system that organized the network of nobility, the clients did not act solely in the interest or need of their patrons.[99] This phenomenon was also mirrored in the relationship between the nobility and the king as manifested in the interaction between the duke of Guise and Henry III.

It is thereby crucial to emphasize that Guise's intention to prove his worth and replace Épernon did not indicate an effort to regain Henry III's trust or serve the crown's interest. It became evident in light of Guise's actions following the Day of Barricades, particularly his return to the royal court. In absence of a direct account from Guise, the letter from Guise's ally

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[98]Montaigne, "Couardise mère de la cruauté," 779-780: "On se servoit anciennement de persommes tierces pour garder qu'il ne s'y fit desordre et desloyauté et pour tesmoigner de la fortune du combat." "Outre l'injuštice d'une telle ačtion, et vilenie, d'engager à la protêction de voštre honneur autre valeur et force que la voštre, je trouve du desavantage à un homme de bien et qui pleinement se fie de soy, d'aller mesler sa fortune à celle d'un second."

[99]See Brian Sandberg, *Warrior Pursuits: Noble Culture and Civil Conflict in Early Modern France*, and Kristen B. Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* on noble clientage and nobility's social relationship in early modern France.

and close friend, Espinac, advising Guise on his return to the court in July 1588, provides insights into Guise's objective. Espinac advised Guise to maintain a facade of obedience and loyalty to the king while discreetly expanding his influence at court.[100] In addition, Espinac also underscores the interconnection between Guise's influence at the court and his authority in the seigneurial provinces, through advising that "make clear to all my lords your relatives, of your party, that whatever their plans are, they do nothing that would prevent you from taking root at court, where you must strengthen yourself so you can then help yourself and their affairs."[101] Espinac's advice aimed at solidifying Guise's position at the court, enabling him to advance both his own interests and those of his clients and relatives. It suggested that Guise's quest for influence at the court, though potentially entailing a restoration of royal favor, ultimately served as a means to a more personal end — bolstering Guise's political standing at the heart of the political stage and strengthening his power base in the provinces. This move to cultivate clientage also contributed to enhancing his reputation and expanding his influence within the nobility.

Conclusion

Montaigne's view of the culture of aristocratic violence suggests a cultural determinant that shaped noble violence during the Wars of Religion. It was characterized by the use of force as an expression of noble identity and the pursuit of valor as a testament to male self-worth. On the one hand, the nobility was fueled by a desire to assert their autonomy and authority vis-à-vis

[100] "Espinac's Advice to Guise on His Return to Court, July 1588," in *The French Wars of Religion : Selected Documents* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 204–5. "If he always remains convinced as he is now that he has no power to rid himself of you and also that by your words and actions you let him know that you are far from wishing to abuse your power." "Having the estate and favour you do, or at least its appearance, it only remains that the whole court should depend on you…"

[101] "Espinac's Advice to Guise on His Return to Court, July 1588," 204.

the monarch, demonstrating their ability to wield power independently and influence political decisions through forceful means. This condition was exemplified by the case study of the massacre of Vassy. On the other hand, their use of violence was shaped by their dependence on the monarch for legitimacy and patronage. By acts of violence, aristocratic men sought to demonstrate their loyalty, prowess and commitment to the monarch's interests so that they could solidify their position within the royal court and secure privileged access to resources and opportunities. This condition is exemplified by the case study of the Day of the Barricades. Overall, during the massacre of Vassy and the Day of the Barricades, the cultural determinant influenced how François de Guise and Henri I de Guise perceived their role and authority and thereby guided them, and their fellow aristocrats, to act in ways that reinforced their status and authority within the cultural framework of his time.

Montaigne's insights in *Essais* and the two case studies entail a reconsideration of the dynamics of the noble culture in early modern France. The martial strength and violent behavior demonstrated by the Guises and other Catholic nobility seriously question Elias's civilizing model that posits increasing social controls led to greater restraint and pacification among the nobility. Instead, the cultural norms and values embedded within the warrior noble culture provide a framework that not only permitted but also encouraged acts of violence. Elias fails to adequately consider the complexities introduced by cultural and personal factors, such as the interaction between cultural identity, self-perception and individual actions. Current analysis of the interplay of these three factors, aligning with Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, suggests that the behaviors and practices of the warrior nobility, including their use of violence, were deeply

rooted in their socialization and cultural context.[102] The hostility and aggressive behavior of warrior nobility can thus be seen as reflections and expressions of their cultural identity, shaped by the *habitus* they internalized from early education, upbringing, and socialization. This perspective suggests a link between conceptions of nobility and their actual practices and thereby enables historical analysis of how culture and noble manhood influenced noble behavior (such as aristocratic violence.) The impact of warrior noble culture on violence provides a basis for examining whether the cultural identity continued to shape the roles and actions of the (warrior) nobility in the following centuries even as the political landscape transformed. It is then worth questioning how the noble culture evolved over time along with the transition of personal violence into state violence.

The motive and experiences of the warrior nobles in the two case studies provide insights into the nobility's relationship to the royal state in early modern France. François de Guise and Henri I de Guise, along with their aristocratic supporters, employed distinct strategies to uphold their noble identity and male honor. Their strategic interactions with the royal authority — either acts of defiance or efforts to gain recognition and favor --- suggests that their engagement in violence was driven by a desire to maintain their nobility in the face of changing circumstances. This desire reflected, or at least implied, a fear of losing their traditional privileges and status and the instability and uncertainty of their cultural identity and societal roles within the aristocracy. The instability may stem from the pressures of maintaining traditional values and status during a period of rapid transformation of aristocracy (as a governing body and a social group). The need to continuously prove their valor and honor through acts of violence suggests an underlying

[102]Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). *Habitus* refers to the ingrained habits and dispositions that individuals acquire through their cultural and social experiences.

sense of uncertainty about their position both within the aristocracy and the social hierarchy. This uncertainty could be further fueled by the evolving power dynamics between the warrior nobility and the centralizing royal authority. As the royal state increasingly asserted its power and monopolized violence in the seventeenth century, warrior nobility's power and influence were often believed to be undermined during this process. This transition of personal violence to state violence curtailed their traditional means of asserting status and power. However, this paper suggests that this process might not have been entirely enforced upon them but rather involved a complex interplay of resistance and cooperation and nobility were not merely passive recipients of royal policies or reactionary to the royal authority. Some military nobility may have played an active role in negotiating and shaping this transition, seeking to align their interests with the emerging centralized state and preserve elements of their traditional identity and authority.

By delving into the experiences and motives of historical actors, the Catholic nobility, the current paper also contributes to enriching the historiography of the Wars of Religion. The massacre of Vassy marked the beginning of the Wars of Religion and the Day of the Barricades indicated its imminent ending. Both episodes were characterized by brutal confrontations and bloodshed and led to a spiral of violence escalation. Historians who analyze the Wars of Religion through chains of causality or a grand narrative often interpret noble violence in relation to the broader social political context. However, the current paper suggests that the proceedings of the Wars of Religion could not be fully understood without considering the personal incentives and cultural values of the nobility. The violent actions of figures like the Duke of Guise were not solely motivated by political or religious factors but were also deeply rooted in the cultural expectations of noble masculinity and the defense of aristocratic honor. By focusing on aristocratic practices and cultural context, this paper highlights the role of violence in the

nobility's efforts to assert their noble identity, defend their honor, and uphold their social standing.

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