

Powerful Women and Misogynistic Subplots: Some Comments on the Necessity of Checking the Primary Sources¹

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AS THE ESSAYS in this forum make clear, the call for histories of medieval women, first sounded over forty years ago, has been answered, and the number of studies of influential women of the Middle Ages is ever growing.² The contributions of Theresa Earenfight, Lois Huneycutt, Amy Livingstone, and Marie Kelleher, in particular, trace how we have come to understand power or authority in ways that reveal rather than mask how women wielded their influence. As a function of the sort of revisions that these scholars describe, some women formerly regarded as harridans, vixens, or worse have been “rehabilitated.”³ Indeed, it seems safe to say that it would be impossible today to find an academic press willing to publish a biography that relied

1. I first presented a version of these comments at a panel entitled “Debatable Queens: (Re)assessing Medieval Stateswomanship, Power, and Authority” at Kalamazoo, 2015.

2. One of the earliest was Pauline Stafford’s *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King’s Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), but the production has been steady. To name just a few of the most recent examples: Elena Woodacre, *The Queens Regnant of Navarre: Succession, Politics, and Partnership, 1274-1512* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Theresa Earenfight, *The King’s Other Body: Maria of Castile and the Crown of Aragon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Miriam Shadis, *Berenguela of Castile (1180-1246) and Political Women in the High Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Kathleen Nolan, *Queens in Stone and Silver: The Creation of a Visual Imagery of Queenship in Capetian France* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

3. See Christine Adams’s essay in this issue. See also Michele Bordin and Paolo Trovato, eds., *Lucrezia Borgia: Storia e mito*, Pubblicazioni dell’ Ferrara; 9 (Florence: Olschki, 2006); Helen E. Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003).

on the kinds of misogynistic assumptions that one routinely finds in earlier histories.⁴

One is therefore all the more discouraged to find old narratives of female promiscuity, intriguing, incompetence, frivolity, cupidity, obesity continuing to circulate, in the form of what we might think of as female “subplots,” in larger histories. When the woman in question is not the star of the study, so to speak, she is often subject to outdated stereotypes gleaned from old studies in spite of the increasing availability of primary sources through digital resources like Gallica, the Internet Archive, and Google E-books and rehabilitations of women formerly vilified. In what follows I make the plea for going to the primary sources, even when the woman in question plays a small role, or, at the very least, when the secondary sources consulted offer flagrantly misogynistic tropes in place of documentation, by focusing on a number of very recent subplots that recycle verifiably incorrect assumptions about Isabeau of Bavaria (1371-1435), queen of mad King Charles VI of France. The once-reviled Isabeau has been undergoing rehabilitation since at least the early twentieth century and, regarding some of the subplots discussed here, the authors are clearly aware of at least some of this scholarship.⁵ However, none of

4. For example, about Eleanor of Aquitaine: “I do not speak of her moral qualities: although probably her faults have been exaggerated, she can hardly be said to shine as a virtuous woman or a good wife.” *Memoriale fratris Walteri de Conventria: The historical collections of Walter of Coventry*, ed. and preface William Stubbs, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1872-73), 2:xxviii; about Anne Boleyn: “Unquestionably, after she became Queen she permitted herself to be addressed by her inferiors with a freedom of language repugnant to the dignity of her sex; and she even interchanged jests with them when they ventured to express their regard for her in terms more expressive of admiration than respect. Lively and attractive as she might be, she had not the qualities required to inspire awe. In the estimation of those about her, she never at any time rose above the mistress; and her own equivocal position with the King lowered the whole moral tone of the circle in which she moved, and lent encouragement to laxity and to licentiousness no English Court had witnessed before.” J. S. Brewer, *The Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. James Gairdner, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1884), 2:178.

5. Isabeau’s rehabilitation has been extensive. My own work in this area, *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) builds on a well-established body of scholarship. See Rachel C. Gibbons, “Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France (1385-1422): The Creation of

the authors engage with this scholarship or return to the chronicles for a fresh look but either decline to footnote the assertions about Isabeau at all or take note of the scholarship without further comment, allowing references to the same secondary sources that are responsible for the queen's black legend in the first place to stand in for analysis. To be clear, the point that I hope to make is not so much that there are "correct" or "incorrect" interpretations of Isabeau's career. The primary sources leave much to the imagination. But I would like to flag as a problem the continuing tendency to base assessments of women tangential to a larger study solely on outdated secondary sources.

I begin with some recent examples of "Isabellan" subplots. A recent study of the assassination of Louis of Orleans, brother of Charles VI, by his cousin and rival Jean of Burgundy, claims that Isabeau "hosted lavish balls that kept the windows of her palace lit late at night and scandalized Parisians with reports of lewd dancing until dawn." Louis was "more than Isabeau's guest at these wild, uninhibited affairs." He was also "rumored to be sharing the queen's bed."⁶ The author cites Richard Vaughan's 1966 biography of Jean of Burgundy and Desmond Seward's *The Hundred Years War* as evidence (more on these below); but in the same note he also cites two studies, by R. C. Famiglietti and Rachel C.

an Historical Villainess," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser 6, no. 6 (1996): 51-74, doi: 10.2307/3679229; R. C. Famiglietti, *Tales of the Marriage Bed from Medieval France (1300-1500)* (Providence, RI: Picardy Press, 1992), and *Royal Intrigue: Crisis at the Court of Charles VI, 1392-1420* (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1986); Theodor Straub, "Isabeau de Bavière, Legende und Wirklichkeit," *Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte* 44 (1981): 131-55; Yann Grandeau, "Les dernières années d'Isabeau de Bavière," *Cercle archéologique et historique de Valenciennes* 9 (1976): 411-28, and "Les Dames qui ont servi la reine Isabeau de Bavière," *Bulletin philologique et historique* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1975): 129-239, and "Le Dauphin Jean, duc de Touraine, fils de Charles VI (1398-1417)," *Bulletin philologique et historique* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1971): 665-728; Heidrun Kimm, *Isabeau de Bavière, reine de France 1370-1435: Beitrag zur Geschichte einer bayerischen Herzogtochter und des französischen Königshauses*, *Miscellanea Bavarica Monacensia*; H. 12, Neue Schriftenreihe des Stadtarchivs München; Bd. 30 (Munich: [Stadtarchiv], 1969); Paul Bonenfant, *Du meurtre de Montereau au traité de Troyes* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1958); and Pierre Champion, *Vie de Charles d'Orléans* (Paris: Champion, 1911), 41.

6. Eric Jager, *Blood Royal: A True Tale of Crime and Detection in Medieval Paris* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014), 57.

Gibbons, both of which demonstrate through a careful reading of all available primary sources that no evidence exists that any such rumor circulated during Isabeau's lifetime. Why, one wonders, does the author cite this material only to ignore it?

One popular form taken by Isabeau's vilification over the years has been to cast the queen as a foil, as the evil opposite of a good figure. These include traitor and adulterer against the patriotic maid Joan of Arc, promiscuous spendthrift against the austere proto-feminist Christine de Pizan, and evil mother against the good mother Yolande of Aragon. A recent set of articles on Yolande of Aragon offers a new twist on the last, pitting Isabeau as the incompetent bungler in contrast with the successful administrator Yolande; as a frivolous fool unable to manage her reputation in opposition to the supremely confident damage-controlling Yolande. We read that unlike Yolande, "Isabeau never matured; she was stuck fast in an adolescent phase of avid selfishness underwritten by an astonishing aptitude for intrigue" and that her "flamboyance and party-girl reputation . . . establish[ed] the foundation for the propaganda that weakened her influence."⁷ The author cites Marcel Thibault, Marie-Josèphe Pinet, and Charity Cannon Willard as sources for this interpretation of Isabeau; in a second article using Isabeau as the incompetent binary opposition to the skilled Yolande, a principal source is Françoise Autrand. Once again, more on these below.

As for studies that simply do not document at all, Isabeau is described with arch disdain in a recent study of Christine de Pizan. We learn that in 1404, the queen "took up with [King Charles VI's] brother, Louis of Orléans . . . ; rumors, often politically motivated, alleged that he was also her lover."⁸ Later in the work, Isabeau is again attached to

7. Zita Rohr, "Self-fashioning Stateswomanship," *Self-Fashioning and Assumptions of Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*, ed. Sean McGlynn and Elena Woodacre (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 67 and 70. See also by the same author "The Practice of Political Motherhood in Late-Medieval France: Yolande of Aragon, *Bonne-Mère* of France," in *The Image and Perception of Monarchy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sean McGlynn and Elena Woodacre (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 23-47.

8. Nadia Margolis, *Introduction to Christine de Pizan* (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2011), 10.

Louis and painted as a corrupt spendthrift: “the unscrupulous Louis and the questionable Isabeau had been garnering ill repute for massive debauchery and financial greed, both individually and, supposedly, as a couple.”⁹ The author neither offers documentation for this interpretation of Isabeau nor engages with revisionist scholarship except to note that recent historians no longer believe the Isabeau and Louis were involved in a love affair. Another recent example of recycling the old narratives without citation or engagement with the scholarship is the assessment of the queen from a work on Henry V’s invasion of France as “fat and forty-ish” and surrounding herself “as she had always done, with gigolos and a menagerie including leopards, cats, dogs, monkeys, swans, owls, and turtle doves. Despite having given her husband twelve children she was notoriously promiscuous.”¹⁰ But possibly the most egregious example of a simple reassertion of the old narrative without documentation can be found in a work on Joan of Arc. Here the author acknowledges the existence of Gibbons’s revisionist scholarship, but pronounces that this attempt “to rehabilitate Isabeau’s reputation is, however, unconvincing.” That is all. No evidence, not so much as a hint as to why Gibbons’s argument is unconvincing.¹¹

It seems only reasonable that an author perpetuating a black legend that has been so extensively rehabilitated would attend to the revised versions of the woman in question and, if unconvinced by the arguments, return to the primary sources to make a new case. Simply gesturing in a footnote at the scholarship that originally made the arguments that have now been revised is not sufficient, all the more so in Isabeau’s case because the specialists cited for evidence of the queen’s bad reputation, depravity, and incompetence in the examples that I offer above do not stand up to even a cursory examination. To return to the specialists generally cited as experts on Isabeau, among Anglophones, Charity Cannon

9. *Ibid.*, 93.

10. Desmond Seward, *The Warrior King and the Invasion of France* (New York: Pegasus, 2014; first published 1988), 143.

11. Kelly DeVries, *Joan of Arc: A Military Leader* (1999; repr., Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2014), 196n22. Although the first editions of Seward’s and DeVries’s studies date from the end of the twentieth century, their recent editions do not update the material on Isabeau.

Willard's 1984 *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works* has given the long tradition of the queen as a frivolous and greedy figure presiding over an entourage of debauched courtiers astonishing staying power. According to Willard, the royal court was "dominated by the lusty Isabeau of Bavaria;" Jean of Burgundy must have felt some concern sending his daughter (married to the dauphin) to the "[court] dominated by the frivolous Isabeau of Bavaria;" "in the summer of 1405 gossip about Isabeau and Louis of Orleans began to circulate as they entered into a romantic liaison that lasted until his death."¹² Willard offers no documentation for any of the claims. Also undocumented are the works of Vaughan and Seward, cited by the author of my first example.¹³

Another commonly cited and undocumented source for unflattering perspectives on Isabeau is Françoise Autrand's *Charles VI: La folie du roi*. Autrand's Isabeau is not Willard's greedy hellcat, but a dazed and confused woman who was quite simply out of her league. Although Autrand's Isabeau plays an effaced role in the history of Charles VI, the historian's interpretation has long nourished the conception of the queen as incompetent. An example of this is Autrand's description of Isabeau's magnificent three-day coronation ceremony in 1389 where the queen is depicted as a tongue-tied simpleton. Presented with gifts by the Parisians, Charles VI and Valentina Visconti, the king's new sister-in-law just arrived from Italy, offer their gracious thanks. Isabeau, in contrast, according to Autrand, "said nothing."¹⁴ Why? Autrand wonders. Was it awkwardness ("maladresse")? Did she not yet speak French (she had been in France for four years at that point)? Or was it simply the malice of a somewhat nationalistic chronicler (Autrand offers no citation here leaving us to hunt down the chronicler) who was happy to observe that eloquence, that eminently royal quality, belonged only to the French line? Of the two major sources of information on Isabeau's coronation,

12. Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works* (New York, NY: Persea Books, 1984), 61, 146, 150.

13. See Richard Vaughan, *Jean the Fearless: The Growth of Burgundian Power* (1966; repr., Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2002), 30, and Desmond Seward, *The Hundred Years War: The English in France, 1337-1453* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1978), 138.

14. Françoise Autrand, *Charles VI: La folie du roi* (Paris: Fayard, 1986), 238.

the chronicle of the Monk of St. Denis does not say anything about anyone—the king, the queen, or Valentina—responding to their gift-givers.¹⁵ The chronicle of Froissart does, however. And when we turn to Froissart, the liberty that Autrand takes in her musings becomes clear.

Introducing his description of the great festival, Froissart recounts that he was in Schoonhoven, in Holland, visiting his patron Guy of Blois when he decided to return to France to “write and register everything that he saw or heard said about what truly happened” during the entry into Paris and coronation of the queen.¹⁶ Froissart does not differentiate between what he witnessed and what he heard about from others, but at several points the distinction is manifest. He recounts the long procession into Paris from St. Denis and finally to Notre-Dame in great detail, for example, indicating either that he was an eye-witness or that he learned about it from eye-witnesses. However, his description of the queen’s anointing is summary, with no detail, suggesting that his sources were not eye-witnesses.¹⁷

Similarly, for the presentation of gifts from the bourgeois of Paris in the chambers of the king, the queen, and, finally, Valentina, it is clear the Froissart either saw or was informed by eye-witnesses about what went on in the chambers of the king and Valentina, but not in those of the queen. Some forty of the city’s most notable men carried litters with gifts through the entire city, arriving finally at the Hôtel Saint Pol. First (“premièrement”) two men dressed as “savages” entered the king’s chambers, which were open, Froissart notes.¹⁸ The king thanks the men, announcing that the gifts are beautiful and rich. Froissart then observes that the bourgeois left the room. But Froissart (or his eye-witness informant) remained with the king, for after the departure of the bourgeois, continuing to narrate what happens in the

15. See the *Chronique du religieux de Saint-Denis contenant le règne de Charles VI, de 1380 à 1422*, ed. and trans. Louis Bellaguet, 6 vols. (Paris: Editions du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, 1994), 2:609-617, and Jean Froissart, *Œuvres de Froissart: Chroniques*, ed. Joseph-Marie-Bruno-Constantin Kervyn de Lettenhove, 26 vols. (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1967), 14:5-25.

16. Froissart, *Chroniques*, 14:5.

17. *Ibid.*, 14:13-14.

18. *Ibid.*, 14:17-20.

king's chambers. The king suggests to Guilleme des Bordes and Jean de Montaigu that they approach the presents for a better look, which they do.¹⁹ But although Froissart enumerates the gifts given to Isabeau (he would have seen them being carried through the streets by the two men dressed like a bear and a unicorn), he has nothing at all to say about their presentation to her. This would be because he was not there in the queen's chamber when she received them: he was still in the king's and therefore could not register the queen's response to her gifts. However, the third presentation, to Valentina, is detailed, like the king's, and, once again, Froissart records her response, indicating that by the time of the third presentation he (or his eye-witness informant) has moved to Valentina's chamber.²⁰ Finally, and of great significance here, the last sentence of Froissart's discussion of the coronation must put to rest any intimation of the queen's lack of finesse or eloquence: the king *and the queen*, the chronicler writes, "grandly thanked all those who spoke to them and who had come to the festival."²¹

In other words, Autrand takes a simple gap in the eye-witness report, easily explained by Froissart or his informant's lingering in the king's chamber and missing the second in a sequence of three events, as evidence of Isabeau's general incompetence and/or idiocy. Feeding into a popular narrative about the queen, Autrand's interpretation still circulates, unchallenged.

These subplots along with the secondary sources that I have discussed here exemplify the problem of approaching an historical figure with an already ingrained bias. But where did this bias against Isabeau come from in the first place? It seems to be the result of studying, uncritically, late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Republican historians who made heroes out of the Burgundians on the basis of the of the most widely read chronicler of the reign of Charles VI, the Monk of St Denis, who until about 1407 was getting his information from Burgundian sources. These early Republican historians condemned the monarchy in general and saw in the Germanic Isabeau a prototype of Marie-Antoinette. These histories trickled into the late twentieth-century literature

19. *Ibid.*, 14:19.

20. *Ibid.*, 14:20.

21. *Ibid.*, 14:25. My emphasis.

by way of a variety of slightly more recent historians, including Marcel Thibault and Marie-Josèphe Pinet, also cited in one of the subplots. From Thibault we learn (without footnote) that Isabeau

did not try to stop Charles VI, engaged in a downward spiral of pleasures. When she was not off on some pilgrimage, or confined to bed because of childbearing, she lived in a whirlwind of insane amusements and splendid celebrations. And while the king wasted his strength, compromised his dignity, ruined his intelligence, she, because of her immoderate lifestyle, produced for the kingdom only sickly babies.²²

As for Pinet, she propagates the story of Isabeau's bad reputation, claiming, without citation, that "all year [1405], people never ceased to talk about the queen."²³

If we return to the primary sources, Isabeau's debauchery, along with her bad reputation, vanishes. Authors of subplots about Isabeau, steeped in various versions of her black legend, tend to imagine three periods during which the queen lost control of her reputation: 1405, 1413, and 1417. The date 1405 is significant because of four criticisms of Isabeau in the chronicle of the Monk of St. Denis (these are the only criticisms of the queen in his six-volume work).²⁴ But the chronicler received his information during this period from Burgundians, against whom Isabeau had recently turned, allying herself with the king's brother, Louis of Orleans. Thus the short-lived disapproval is not surprising. During roughly this same time, a Burgundian poem, the "Songe véritable," appeared in which Charles VI's closest advisors and Isabeau are chastised for cupidity.²⁵ Reading the entire poem reveals it to be evidence that Isabeau enjoyed a positive reputation during those years, except, predictably,

22. Marcel Thibault, *Isabeau de Bavière: la jeunesse, 1371-1405* (Paris: Perrin, 1903), 207.

23. Marie-Josèphe Pinet, *Christine de Pisan, 1364-1430: étude bibliographique et littéraire* (Paris: Champion, 1927), 130.

24. These occur in Froissart, *Chroniques* 3:228; 266; 288-90. I discuss these at length in chapter four of *The Life and Afterlife*.

25. "Le Songe véritable," ed. Henri Moranvillé (Paris: Extract from *Mémoires de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris et de l'Ile de France*, 1890).

among the Burgundians. The poem criticizes Louis of Orleans, Jean of Berry, and the king's grand maître d'hôtel, Jean de Montaigu, whom Jean of Burgundy had put to death in 1409, and, last, Isabeau: in short, all those standing between the king and Jean of Burgundy. In the poem, the allegorical figure Fortune proclaims that she is going to deprive the Orleanists, including the queen, of their greatest gifts. But, for the queen this is not her riches. Rather it is her reputation. Indeed, Fortune adds, she has already begun to erode Isabeau's good name over the past months. The timing, of course, corresponds to the time that Jean of Burgundy began to perceive Isabeau as a threat. Most important, if we look at Fortune's grammatical tenses, it is clear that although she has been trying, she has not yet managed to damage the queen's reputation: the allegorical figure claims that she will, in the future, turn her wheel and cause the queen such shame that she will be deserted by all: "Je ly feray avoir tel honte, / Et tel dommage et telle perte, / Qu'en la fin en sera deserte."²⁶ Fortune is scheming to ruin other courtiers—but has not yet succeeded at the time of the poem's composition—and she is also planning to destroy Isabeau's reputation. Such a scheme only makes sense if Isabeau's reputation was good.

The second period during which Isabeau's reputation supposedly took a hit is the Cabochian uprising of 1413. A common perception exists that Isabeau's ladies were targeted by the Cabochians, either because they were genuinely a dissolute group or because they were believed to be so. But neither of these is accurate. Their arrest must be seen in the larger context of a series of arrests of non-Burgundians in positions of power. A survey of the chronicles shows that the dauphin's chancellor and his chamberlain, both of whom the young man had appointed to replace the Duke of Burgundy's men, were arrested along with several others of his men. About a month later a group of rebellious Parisians broke into the Hôtel Saint Pol, where they demanded that another group associated with the royal family, male and female, be handed over.²⁷ The latter

26. "Le Songe véritable," 60, lines 1736-38.

27. For accounts of the arrest, see Enguerran de Monstrelet, *La chronique d'Enguerran de Monstrelet, 1400-1444*, ed. Louis Claude Douët-d'Arcq, 6 vols. (Paris: Renouard, 1857-62), 2:352-54; Jean le Fèvre de Saint Rémy, *Choix de chroniques et mémoires sur l'histoire de France*, ed. Jean Alexandre Buchon (Paris: A. Desrez, 1838),

group was released on August 4.²⁸ The ladies, then, were arrested, like their male counterparts from the households of the king, the dauphin, and the queen because they held well-paid positions of importance and influence. The chroniclers describing the incident draw no distinction between the reasons for arrest or treatment of either group on the basis of their gender; they leave no hints that the ladies were defamed, or at least defamed in any way different from the men. It is only modern scholars who focus exclusively on the queen's ladies and assert that their bad reputations were the reason for their arrest.

Finally, a sweep of Isabeau's chateau at Vincennes in April, 1417, by the Armagnacs then under the leadership of Yolande of Aragon, is cited as evidence of Isabeau's bad reputation. On April 5, 1417, with the Armagnacs in control of Paris, the dauphin, then Jean of Touraine, a Burgundian protégé, died suddenly. The new dauphin, Charles, had been married into the house of Anjou, which was Armagnac and headed at that time by Yolande alone, as her husband, Louis of Anjou, was at death's door. Just before the death of the dauphin Jean, Isabeau and the young Charles had been in Senlis, negotiating the entry of the nervous dauphin into Armagnac-controlled Paris. When the dauphin died, Isabeau and the new dauphin were installed in the chateau at Vincennes. But the Armagnacs could not allow the new dauphin, Charles, to be left in the hands of his mother, who was seeking reconciliation between the factions. The Burgundians were preparing to march on Paris to "find a way to govern the king and the dauphin," and the Armagnacs knew that if Jean of Burgundy made peace with the dauphin, they would be cast from power.²⁹ Yolande created a council of Angevin advisors for the dauphin and, at the same time, the Armagnacs who "counselled the

80-82; and *Chronique du religieux*, 5:44-46.

28. See Jean Juvénal des Ursins, *Histoire de Charles VI, roy de France, et des choses mémorables advenues durant quarante-deux années de son règne: Depuis 1380 jusqu'à 1422*, *Nouvelle collection des mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France*, ed. Joseph-François Michaud and Jean-Joseph-François Poujoulat, 34 vols. (Paris, 1836-39), ser. 1, vol. 2, 309-569, 488.

29. See Pierre de Fénin, "Mémoires de Pierre de Fénin, écuyer et panetier de Charles VI, roi de France," *Collection universelle des mémoires particuliers à l'histoire de France*, 5 vols. (London, 1785), 5:280.

king” arranged for a sweep of Isabeau’s chateau.³⁰ Isabeau was imprisoned in Tours.

Despite its flagrantly political motivation, historians have often held this incident out as evidence of Isabeau’s court’s reputation for debauchery: the court, historians have assumed, had been regarded as a den of iniquity and for this reason it had been dissolved. Some contemporary chroniclers understood the political motivation. Monstrelet, for example, notes that with the queen safely under lock and key, the dauphin and the Armagnacs plundered her treasure.³¹

Yolande won in this event. But does this mean that Isabeau was utterly incompetent? Surely it is an easier job to lead a faction than to create peace between warring factions. Although the queen failed to put an end to or feud between the Orleanist/Armagnacs and the Burgundians, it does not seem reasonable to imagine that had she been better at controlling her image, whatever that means, she might have succeeded. Anthropological studies of feuding explain the phenomenon in terms of clans, within which males bond very strongly.³² When one of their members is killed by an outsider they seek revenge. Peace can be restored by various means, but, most importantly, the killing clan, the Orleanist/Burgundian, has to admit guilt and negotiate. In this view, Jean of Burgundy could have ended the feud by admitting guilt and making reparations.³³ Was Isabeau responsible for his consistent refusal to come to the table? It is not as if she did not work on Jean: on August 13, 1410, he wrote to her from Douai, acknowledging that the king had assigned her the weighty task of appeasing the divisions that existed in the kingdom and that her honor would be diminished if she failed at this task; but he cannot do what she asks. He wants her to know that he has always worked to serve and honor her and the king. But the Orleanists have

30. *Chronique du religieux*, 6:72; Juvénal des Ursins, *Histoire de Charles VI*, 533.

31. Monstrelet, *Chronique*, 3:176.

32. See, for example, Christopher Boehm, *Blood Revenge: The Anthropology of Feuding in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), and Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm and Bjørn Poulsen, eds., *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007).

33. Bernard Guenée, *Un Meurtre, une société: l’assassinat du duc d’Orléans, 23 novembre 1407* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 186.

promised to come to the table only if Jean admits guilt, and Jean, as he writes of himself, is driven by “the pure necessity to guard his honor.”³⁴

As the other contributions to this forum demonstrate, understanding medieval women requires us to return to the primary sources, to re-read them from perspectives appropriate to the enterprise. It seems odd that, in a time of ever-more-easily accessed primary sources and awareness of long-held male biases in writing about women of the Middle Ages, narratives like those I have noted here continue to circulate. It may be too much to ask, as I did at the beginning of this piece, that medieval historians examine the primary sources and recent scholarship on every woman they mention. I will close, however, by suggesting that it would be useful to check up on secondary sources that deploy obviously misogynistic tropes, particularly in those sources—numerous in the case of Isabeau—that do not document their claims.

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34. Juvénal des Ursins, *Histoire de Charles VI*, 465.