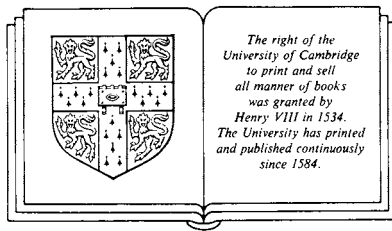


# The Duke of Anjou and the Politique Struggle during the Wars of Religion

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge*

*London New York New Rochelle*

*Melbourne Sydney*

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1986

First paperback edition 2002

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Holt, Mack P.

The Duke of Anjou and the politique struggle during the wars of religion.  
(Cambridge studies in early modern history)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. France – History – Wars of the Huguenots, 1562–1598.
2. Anjou, François, duc d', 1554–1584. I. Title. II. Series.  
DC111.H65 1986 944'.029 85-20930

ISBN 0 521 32232 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 89278 3 paperback

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## Introduction

In December 1576 Queen Elizabeth's principal agent in the Netherlands, Thomas Wilson, proclaimed that the entire fate of Christendom rested in the hands of three men: Don John of Austria, William of Orange, and François de Valois, duke of Anjou.<sup>1</sup> Although he died prematurely only two years later, Don John had already made a name for himself as a military commander at Lepanto. William of Orange led a small group of Dutch provinces in a successful revolt against the mightiest power in Western Europe and, in so doing, established himself as one of the principal heroes of the sixteenth century as well as the *pater patriæ* of the Dutch Republic. What became of the duke of Anjou? All his political and military ambitions ended in tragic failure. He died in 1584 at only 29 years of age and has been largely forgotten ever since. Because all his grandiose dreams ended in frustration and his career was cut short by a premature death, Anjou has been assigned merely a walk-on role on the European stage. After four hundred years of historical writing about the French Wars of Religion, not one biography or major monograph – either serious or popular – has been devoted to the duke of Anjou. This is hardly a just reward for someone who was considered one of the three most important men in all Christendom.

Although Wilson's prognostication proved inaccurate, it is nevertheless an indication that Anjou was a far more consequential figure in the eyes of his contemporaries than his historical press would indicate. Historians appear to have forgotten what Anjou's contemporaries could never ignore, namely that he was destined to become the next king of France. By the late 1570s it was clear that Henry III was unable to produce an heir, a circumstance which left his younger brother, the duke of Alençon and Anjou, as the sole Valois successor to the crown. Thus, his peers viewed him not just as a prince of the blood, but as the future François III. In August 1578, for instance, in commenting upon a possible marriage alliance between Anjou and Queen Elizabeth, Francis Walsingham lamented that it was 'the expectation of the Crowne of Fraunce that is lykely to lyght uppon him which dyfficultye above all others I doe weygh'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, for one brief period there was the possibility that he might one day wear the three

<sup>1</sup> Kervijn de Lettenhove, *Relations*, vol. ix, pp. 67–8, Wilson to Leicester, 3 December 1576.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. x, p. 744, Walsingham to Sussex, 18 August 1578.

## Introduction

crowns of France, England, and the Netherlands, a heady prospect upon which his contemporaries commented.<sup>3</sup>

More importantly, because of this prospect Anjou unwittingly became the focus of various political forces within France and abroad, agents who saw in his leadership a possible alternative and escape from the political and religious divisions that plagued Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century. With the belief that religious coexistence was preferable to the ravages of continued civil war and the possible destruction of the state, these political factions turned to Anjou to intervene in their struggles and to fashion a more lasting political solution. Because some form of religious toleration was usually the most visible plank in their platforms, they were later given the pejorative appellation of *politiques* by their more uncompromising and zealous Catholic opponents.<sup>4</sup> First in France, after the St Bartholomew's massacres of 1572, and then in the Netherlands, in the late 1570s and early 1580s, various *politique* factions turned to Anjou for leadership. These were not organized political parties in any modern sense; indeed, their lack of structure and coherence contributed to their lack of success. Moreover, although the duke did share with these factions a general commitment to freedom of conscience (if not necessarily freedom of worship) in religious matters, which made him attractive to many, he unquestionably did not share their political and intellectual aspirations. Thus, Anjou was never really a part of the *politique* movement, much less its self-proclaimed leader. In this sense the *politique* struggle in the latter half of the sixteenth century was a struggle for political and legal recognition of religious coexistence in order to preserve the state. In France this victory was not achieved – and even achieved then only temporarily – until the reign of Henry IV. In the Netherlands the struggle failed as the provinces eventually became permanently divided, largely on account of religious differences. Nevertheless, during his lifetime François de Valois, duke of Alençon and Anjou became the focus of factions from both states, figures who looked to him for an exit from the morass of civil war.

Thus, in 1576 Thomas Wilson had justification enough for bracketing Anjou together with Don John of Austria and William of Orange as the most important figures in all Christendom. That Anjou failed to live up to these expectations, largely due to his own shortcomings and a premature death in 1584, does not alter this fact. The story of this long neglected and oft-maligned prince deserves examination.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Groen van Prinsterer, *Archives*, vol. vi, p. 399, Roch de Sorbiers, seigneur des Pruneaux, to William of Orange, 22 June 1578.

<sup>4</sup> The term *politique* was not really in general use until the mid-1580s, when it was almost always a term of derision used by Leaguers to denounce anyone, Protestant or Catholic, who proposed any form of religious coexistence. The usage here – as a descriptive rather than pejorative epithet applied to figures in the 1570s and early 1580s – is thus anachronistic. I can think of no better alternative, however, and shall employ the term in this fashion throughout this study. Moreover, contemporary works such as Jacques-Auguste de Thou's *Histoire universelle* (first edition 1604–9) quickly adopted this usage of the term by the early seventeenth century, so there is some justification for using the term *politique* in this manner.