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# Women and Power at the French Court, 1483–1563

*Edited by*  
*Susan Broomhall*

Amsterdam University Press

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### Rhetorics of Power in the Letters of Diane de Poitiers

*Susan Broomhall*

#### Abstract

This essay explores the gendered performance of power in the letters of Diane de Poitiers (1499–1566), particularly during the period when, as mistress of Henri II (1519–59), she wielded considerable political influence at court. It argues that her power was established and enacted through performances of authoritative behaviors and rhetoric that were inflected by contemporary understandings about gender and explores a number of distinct strategies embedded in Diane's correspondence. These techniques reflected the corporeal and sexual nature of her access to consideration as a political interlocutor but also aimed to position her status as a figure of social and economic influence beyond this original means to power.

**Keywords:** Diane de Poitiers, letters, royal mistress, emotions, networks, financial transactions

This essay explores the performance of power in the letters of Diane de Poitiers (1499–1566), particularly during the period when, as mistress of Henri II (1519–1559), she wielded considerable political influence at the court. For Diane, power was exercised in a number of forms, at different historical moments, and with varying degrees of success. It included emotional influence on political interlocutors, involvement in decision-making regarding the French kingdom, communicating political and military information, liaising between factional leaders, increasing economic security in lands and titles both directly for herself and also for her extended family, and accruing greater recognition for her descendants in elite dynastic networks. As this essay explores, Diane's ability to claim some of these capacities shifted over her lifetime and in regard to her personal circumstances. Some kinds

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of power displayed rhetorical longevity in her missives, while the assertion of other influences waned, particularly after the death of Henri II.

Diane's power was enacted and demonstrated in many contexts, including through activities such as patronage and courtly positions for her favorites. It was visualized in artworks and constructed in built monuments including châteaux at Anet and Chenonceau. However, this essay draws upon Diane's extant letters as a key source for examining how her power was performed rhetorically. Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender as performative has been a powerful analytical tool for historians studying Diane's contemporary, Catherine de Médicis (1519–1589).<sup>1</sup> However, Diane's activities and writings have not been studied in such a light to date. Considering Diane's epistolary practices of power through the lens of performativity, though, demonstrates how her power was established and enacted through performances of authoritative behaviors and rhetoric that were inflected by contemporary understandings about gender. This analysis explores a number of distinct strategies embedded in Diane's correspondence, from the range of networks created and maintained via the work of letters, the nature of the political matters that she addressed with interlocutors, to the positioning of particular phrases within the letter text that asserted her proximity to influence, and techniques of unique autograph letter-writing that demonstrated her access to power both within the court and extending beyond it. It also included distinctive emotional tones, different offers of service, and wide-ranging matters for discussion raised with the diverse recipients of her letters. These techniques reflected the corporeal and sexual nature of Diane's access to consideration as a political interlocutor but also aimed to position her status as a figure of social and economic influence beyond this original means of power. Through textual, material and spatial mechanisms within epistolarity, Diane de Poitiers demanded and exerted consideration as a political protagonist at the court across a wide range of matters.

## Building Networks

The established record of Diane's extant correspondence is patchy and provides an incomplete picture of her strategic activities at the court. For

This research has been supported by the Australian Research Council Future Fellowship: FT130100070.

<sup>1</sup> Butler, 1996; Butler, 1999. This is applied to consideration of Catherine by ffolliott; Crawford, 2000; Crawford, 2004; Broomhall, 2017b; Broomhall, 2018b.

example, no letters as yet uncovered are addressed to her two daughters, Françoise (1515–1577) or Louise de Brézé (1521–1577), to Henri II or to Catherine de Médicis.<sup>2</sup> Yet we know from her movements and positions at court, and from her letters to others, that these were individuals with whom she interacted intimately at the court. For the whole of Henri's reign, Diane enjoyed direct access to the royal couple as one of the foremost ladies-in-waiting to the queen. Epistolary communication was by no means the only transmission pathway for information therefore. Nonetheless, the bulk of Diane's extant letters do concern the period of her acknowledged political influence, during the reign of Henri II from 1547 to 1559, and can therefore help to elucidate her distinctive epistolary strategies in her most prominent years at the court.

These letters reflect a range of Diane's relationships at and beyond the court during the reign of Henri II. Some of her correspondents are those who occupied positions key to Diane's own influence at court. A man Diane regularly addressed as 'my ally' (*mon allye*), Jean II, seigneur de Humières (d. 1550), had enjoyed an illustrious career in close proximity to the royal family from the reign of François I (1494–1547). He had been Henri's governor as *dauphin* and that of his elder brother before him. Humières was named in turn the governor of the children of Henri and Catherine in October 1546.<sup>3</sup> Both before and after his death in 1550, Diane also corresponded with his wife, then widow, Françoise de Contay (d. 1557).<sup>4</sup>

Other correspondents were members of key political dynasties with whom Diane was establishing strategic alliances, or indeed those who were hoping for the same from her. These included both male and female correspondents from among France's elite families. In July 1558, for example, Diane thanked Marguerite de Bourbon, Duchess of Nevers (1516–1559), who had sent her legs of ham as a gift.<sup>5</sup> Chief among her political allies, however, was the House of Guise, led by Claude de Lorraine, Duke of Guise (1496–1550), then his son François (1519–1563). In August 1547, Diane had wed her younger daughter, Louise, to the duke's third son, Claude (1526–1573). Diane inserted herself into the Guise communication network, passing letters from Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre (1492–1549), to François, then Duke of Aumale.

2 Likewise, no letters are addressed from Catherine de Médicis to Diane de Poitiers although we do have letters from Henri to Diane. See Broomhall, 2018a.

3 Potter, pp. 131–32.

4 Letters from Diane to Contay before her husband's death are no longer extant, but in Diane's letters to Jean, it is clear that she is also corresponding to his wife. See for example, BnF, ms. fr. 3155, fol. 18<sup>r-v</sup> and BNF, ms. fr. 3128, fol. 12<sup>r</sup>.

5 Poitiers, pp. 151–52, citing BNF, ms. fr. 4711, fol. 31, Rheims, 29 July [1558].



Conveniently for Diane, these particular letters demonstrated not only Marguerite's good wishes for her allies, but also the queen's respect for her personally.<sup>6</sup> When the new duke's uncle, Jean, Cardinal of Lorraine (1498–1550), died in May 1550 shortly after his father Claude in April the same year, Diane's letter, ostensibly of condolence, promised her assistance in helping François and his brothers to manage the succession of his properties. '[Y]our brothers must not be forgotten', she wrote, 'and even though I believe that the King will proceed as he has done in the past, I will still bring it to his attention by my letter, even though I know he will do it'.<sup>7</sup> Although insisting that her intervention was not necessary, Diane nonetheless promised to assist the duke and his brother in managing their transition to power.

During the later 1550s, however, Diane astutely expanded her allegiances at court and this may explain an increase in extant letters to the Montmorencys at this period. Letters to the Constable Anne de Montmorency (1493–1567), a man who was Henri's senior and a deeply trusted military and political adviser, formed another significant, but more complicated, network at court. Henri bestowed a widely noted affection on the older man who was a powerful influence on his political thought, especially in the final days of the Italian Wars.<sup>8</sup> While the Guise dynasty favored a hawkish policy in the campaigns against the Spanish king, Philip II (1527–1598), during the late 1550s, Montmorency's captivity under Habsburg surveillance led the statesman, and eventually Henri, to favor peace. Diane corresponded directly with both the Constable and his wife, and eventually forged a marriage between her grand-daughter Antoinette de la Marck (1542–1591), and Montmorency's son, Henri I, Duke of Damville (1534–1614), in 1558. Diane's autograph letters to the imprisoned Constable during this period reflected these ambitions, as she expressed her 'hope' to him that the peace negotiations would soon see Montmorency return to court.<sup>9</sup>

While these networks do not reflect the full extent of Diane's activities as these are revealed in other archival sources, they do chart the broad lines of her influence that was exercised among the highest echelons of the French aristocracy, for whom the kind of power that Diane wielded, as we shall explore, was most likely to be of interest. On the other hand, they do not bear evidence of strong international networks beyond this domain of

6 BnF, ms. fr. 20537 (formerly Gaignières 425), fol. 32<sup>r</sup>.

7 'il ne fault pas oublyer messrs voz freres aussy croy je que le Roy suyvra les choses quil a faict du passe, je l'en ramenteveray encor par ma lettre bien que je sache quil le fera', Anet, 21 May [1550], copy, BnF, ms. fr. 23236 (formerly Gaignières 2871), fol. 101<sup>r</sup>.

8 See Broomhall, 2018 a.

9 See BnF, ms. fr. 3021, fol. 94<sup>r</sup>.

the kind that was often exercised by foreign-born queens such as Eleanor of Austria (1498–1558) and Catherine de Médicis. In this respect, Diane's power base remained firmly French.

## Voicing Authority

The contents of Diane's letters demonstrate, perhaps better than do the recipients of her extant letters, the nature and extent of her power. Her letters ranged over a wide variety of subjects, but her discussions on child-rearing, on contemporary military strategies, and on courtly political manoeuvres were significant domains in which she claimed authority. This assertion of an advisory role on key matters of national significance translated into power to influence decision-making. Significantly, the means by which Diane claimed authority were all marked by her gender. Advising on the health and wellbeing of children were legitimate matters of discussion for a woman who was an experienced mother, as also was her offer to supply favors and services for leading elite correspondents. Thus, the framework for establishing and performing Diane's power was informed by contemporary expectations of her sex.

A focus of Diane's correspondence with Jean de Humières, governor of the royal children, and his wife, was the matter of managing the health and wellbeing of their young charges. Diane proposed advice on wet-nurses, diet, air, and sanitation of the chambers of the children. She sought and queried information about their accidents and illnesses, and demanded higher degrees of communication at key moments.<sup>10</sup> In general, Diane offered little explicit evidence as to why the couple should follow the sometimes firm health recommendations laid out in her letters, views that were clearly marked as her own views: 'it seems to me that you would do well to...'; 'it seems to me that...'.<sup>11</sup> She did not explicitly refer to her experiences as a mother of two adult daughters nor that conversations with medical professionals at court gave weight to her advice, although she did suggest that the latter would share her ideas: 'I think that the doctors will be of the same opinion'.<sup>12</sup> Diane's close attention to the royal children gave widespread recognition to her activities at court in this domain. It was this work that medical authors praised publicly in dedicating publications to her.

10 See Broomhall, 2004, pp. 191–98.

11 'il me semble que feriez bien', 'me semble que', Oiron, 20 May [1551], BnF, ms. fr. 3208, fol. 127<sup>r</sup>.

12 'je croy que les medecins seront de ceste opinion', BnF, ms. fr. 3208, fol. 127<sup>r</sup>.

Guillaume Chrestien (1500–1558), physician to the king and his children, offered his 1559 translation of Jacques Sylvius's work on menstruation to her. Chrestien argued that Diane might be particularly interested in his text, specifically lauding her attention to the royal children; that is, her 'care not only for the conception and birth of them, but also to have them duly fed by robust, healthy, well complexioned wetnurses'.<sup>13</sup> Diane was also the targeted recipient of work by Claude Valgelas (fl. 1554–59), who in 1559 translated into French the *Commentaire de la conservation de santé, et prolongation de vie* of Hierosme de Monteux (c. 1495–1560).<sup>14</sup> Diane's child-rearing and medical knowledge might have legitimized authors' claims to her patronage, but it was also her proximity to power that these authors, and her correspondence in this domain, made evident.

Diane insisted that the Humières should attend more diligently to greater communication not with her but with the *dauphin*. In this respect, Diane's message made clear, without being absolutely explicit, her intimate knowledge of Henri, and more particularly his sentiments, desires, and keen interest in his children. When Monsieur de Humières failed to explain clearly a decision in the royal nursery, Diane informed him that Henri 'was most annoyed about it'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, when Henri's daughter, Claude (1547–1575), fell ill with measles, Diane warned Humières that 'the King was stunned that you have not advised him of it'. In these letters, Diane could also demonstrate her capacity to protect those whom she favored, continuing: 'but I told him that it must be that your letters were lost, so you would do well to make your excuses as best you can'.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the advice Diane proffered suggestively became, by association, advice with royal assent. However, extant correspondence from both the children's mother, Catherine de Médicis, and their father, Henri, demonstrated the assiduous degree of attentiveness of the royal couple to their children, coupled with many independent recommendations. What role then was Diane's own advice intended to play? In most cases, Diane's recommendations mirrored and supported those offered by Henri, sometimes in contradiction to advice

13 'auez eu soing de la conception & natiuite d'iceux, mais aussi à les faire deuement nourrir par femmes nourrices vigoureuses, saines, bien complexionnees', Chrestien, p. 107.

14 Broomhall, 2004, p. 193.

15 'il ma semble que monsen estoit tout fasche', Joinville, 27 October [1546], BnF, Ms. fr. 3155, fol. 18<sup>r</sup>.

16 'le Roy a este bien esbay que ne len avez adverty mais je luy ay dit quil failloit que voz lres eussent este perdues parquoy ferez bien de faire voz excuses le myeulx que pourrez', Fontainebleau, 27 December [1547], BnF, ms. Fr. 3128, fol. 20<sup>r</sup>.

from Catherine.<sup>17</sup> However, its strongest message and intent was perhaps to demonstrate and remind her readers of her unique significance as a mediator to and for the royal couple.

Another facet of Diane's epistolary discussion was her intimate knowledge of the campaigns of the Italian Wars and of the personal movements and actions of the king. She was clearly exceptionally well informed. Analysis of Henri's letters to her present a clear picture of the high level of strategic military information to which she was privy directly from the king.<sup>18</sup> Once again, correspondence provided a mechanism through which Diane could demonstrate her power and intimate knowledge of the king's business. Her dissemination of military news was not limited to senior men. To Madame de Humières, Diane wrote of how the latest information from the war's frontline 'could not have been better: the taking of Metz, which fell two days ago, so that our people are now inside'.<sup>19</sup> Even where she had little new to report to her network of friends and allies, Diane did not fail to suggest her proximity to potential sources of information. While Henri was away at the front near Boulogne, Diane observed to Jean de Humières, 'I have no other news from the camp than what I sent you, except that that evening, I was told that only Follambert was left to be taken and all the other strongholds had been taken. If I know of any other news, I will not fail to let you know'.<sup>20</sup>

War offered Diane the opportunity to use her correspondence with far-flung servants of the king in order to present herself as a mediator. She assured those on campaign that she could employ her physical and emotional proximity to the monarch to remind Henri of their important contribution. This included the Duke of Guise who, from the frontline at Metz in 1552, was seeking reassurance from a number of courtly advisers of the king's recognition of his service and forthcoming royal assistance towards the costs he had personally incurred.<sup>21</sup> Diane's correspondence with Guise provided a useful delay for Henri's finances, as she assured the

17 See Broomhall, 2004, pp. 191–98.

18 Broomhall, 2018 a.

19 'ne sçauroient estre meilleures cest de la prinse de mayes que sest rendu il y a deux jours de sorte que noz gens sont dedans', Joinville, 12 avril [1551–52], BnF ms. fr. 3124, fol. 53<sup>r</sup>.

20 'je nay point heu de nouvelles du camp que ce que vous en mandis si ce nest que ce soit la on me manda encores quil ny avoit aprandre que Follambert et que tous les aultres fortz estoit pris. Si jen sçay quelques autres nouvelles je ne faudray vous en advertir', Anet, 29 August [1559], BnF, ms. fr. 3208, fol. 115<sup>r</sup>.

21 See also the letter from Cardinal de Lénoncourt, 7 September 1552, copy, BnF, ms. fr. 23236 (formerly Gaignières 2871), fol. 195<sup>r-v</sup>.

Duke that 'the lord King thinks of nothing other than to aid you'.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, she supplied important emotional management on the king's behalf in her correspondence to François I of Cleves, Duke of Nevers (1516–1561), which enabled the king to delay a range of decisions and costs:

I receive the letter you wrote in which I saw what you had written. I spoke of it to the King, who assured me of his great contentment with you and your good duty to his service. He said to me that he could not think of it now, putting me off until after his campaign and assuring me of the strong friendship that he holds for you.<sup>23</sup>

Later when the king required a number of noblemen to supply wood from their estates, Diane was among those whose correspondence helped to smooth relations between the king and his frustrated courtiers. To the Duke of Nevers, she gave pledges of Henri's appreciation of their sacrifices. Recognizing the 'quantity of wood from your forest, which is no small thing', Diane assured the Duke, '[...] he asks for nothing more [...]. His Majesty is well satisfied with your service'.<sup>24</sup> In these exchanges, Diane provided the king with an important service of emotional labor on his behalf, making herself an indispensable component of his political communication and strategy.

Diane sustained a lengthy correspondence with Henri's marshal and governor of Piedmont, Charles de Cossé, Count of Brissac (1505/6–1563). Here, her letters discussing war formed an important part of the royal strategy of communication. From Turin, Brissac sought assurances of his continued favor with Henri, which Diane's correspondence supplied. She not only provided Brissac with news of the king's military activities, 'informing you that the King is about to depart' for the frontline of the conflict, but also promising him 'that the said Lord carries for you much goodwill that it is not possible

22 'Je vous assure que led. Seigneur Roy ne pense qu'a vous secourir', [1552], copy, BnF, ms. fr. 23236 (formerly Gaignières 2871), fol. 269<sup>r</sup>.

23 'j'é reseu la letre que m'avez escrite, où j'é veu se qui vous a pleu me mander, j'en ay parlé au Roy, lequel m'a assuré du grant contentement qu'il a de vous, & du bon devoir que vous fètes pour son servisse; il m'a dit que maintenant il n'y povèt panser, men remetant après ses guerres, & qui m'asseurèt de la bonne amytyé qui vous porte', Poitiers, p. 114, citing BnF, ms. fr. 4711, fol. 25 [Compiègne, December 1552].

24 'j'ay recue les lettres que vous m'avés escriptes, & entendu, par ce porteur, la quantité de boys que l'on avoyt mise sur vostre forest, qui n'estoit par petite chose; toutesfoys le Roy, quant je luy en ay parlé, it n'entendoyt pas vous y fère tort, mais byen ayse de l'invention qui luy a [été] baillé pour les marchans quy luy délivreront le boys; il ne demandoit autre chose [...]. Sa Majesté est byen satisfaite de vostre servisse', Poitiers, p. 147, citing BnF, ms. fr. 4711, fol. 21 [Paris, 27 February 1557–58].

to have more and relies entirely on you for matters over there [...] I know that he has exactly the opinion of you that you could hope for'.<sup>25</sup> With Brissac, Diane employed a suggestive language of particular friendship, in which she not only promised to provide Brissac with up-to-the minute information 'as he who I esteem one of my best friends', but also to serve his interests at the court 'with a good heart'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, a particular intimacy between them was perceived by subsequent generations, who speculated as to why Henri had sent Brissac away from court, tasked with the governance in Turin. This was reflected in Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* in which the fictional Diane de Poitiers conducts an affair with Brissac unbeknownst to the king.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not Diane and Brissac enjoyed a particular emotional bond, her communicative assistance to the distant courtier and governor secured an ally on relatively achievable terms.

As is evident in Diane's letters to Brissac and as can be seen across a wide range of her letters to the aristocratic elite, Diane offered to do her correspondents favors at court and with the king. To Antoinette de Bourbon (1493–1583), the dowager Duchess of Guise, Diane insisted in a handwritten letter that 'if I had the honour to be your very own sister I could not have more desire to serve you in some way'.<sup>28</sup> She concluded another letter to François, Duke of Guise, reminding him that if 'there is a service that I could do for you, I beg you not to spare me, as she who will hold herself very happy to do something that is agreeable to you for the desire that I have to remain your humble [friend] to do you service'.<sup>29</sup> Diane even justified her advice to the Duchess, that he send her brother to court to assist the king, by explaining that her recommendation was offered because 'the desire that I have to do service to all your House made me write of it to you'.<sup>30</sup> Diane's

25 'pour vous faire entendre que le Roy est sur son partement', 'que le dict Sgr vous pourte si bonne vollenté qu'il n'est possible de plus, & se repose entièrement en vous des affaires de par de là; [...] je congnoys qu'il vous a à une tell oppinion que le pouvés souhaiter', Poitiers, pp. 94–95, citing BnF, ms. fr. 20451 (Gaignières 325), fol. 129, Joinville, 4 April [1551–52].

26 'comme celluy que j'estime de mes meilleurs amys', 'd'aussi bon cueur', Poitiers, pp. 120–21, citing BnF, ms. fr. 20451 (Gaignières 325), fol. 179, Paris, 13 April [1552–53].

27 See Letts, pp. 147–71; Grande.

28 'sy javes lonneur destre vostre proupe seur que je ne sares avoyr myleure anvye de vous servyr an queque chouse', [November 1552?] BnF, ms. fr. 3237, fol. 13<sup>r</sup>.

29 'Sy par deça il y a service que je vous puisse faire, je vous prie ne m'espargner, comme celle qui se tiendra tousjours bienheureuse de faire chose qui vous soit agreable pour l'envye que jay de vous demeurer Vostre humble a vous fere service', [1552], copy, BnF, ms. fr. 23236 (formerly Gaignières 2871), fol. 269<sup>r</sup>.

30 'lanvye que je de fere servyse a toute vostre meson mest le vous écryre', [November 1552], BnF ms. fr. 3237, fol. 9<sup>r</sup>.

promises of service, let alone what she may have done for her clients and friends, suggested in themselves her powerful capacity to achieve favors.

Whether discussing the royal children or political and military affairs, Diane's authority to offer advice and insight to her varied correspondents was positioned in her letters, implicitly and explicitly, as stemming from a single source — her proximity to the royal couple and her particular intimacy with the thoughts, wishes, and feelings of the king. This clearly generated a great deal of political credit that enabled her to interact with key political factional leaders, to offer them services and unique communication conduits within the courtly political sphere.

### Phrasing Power

Diane's letters used a range of common phrases with her correspondents that marked her particular access to power through the king. Some common statements made clear to readers how close Diane was to the center of royal power. Her letters often presented claims to know the feelings or wishes of the king based on close observation. Such claims formed an important part of her missives to the Humières couple managing the household of the royal children. She could warn Jean de Humières of Henri's frustration at not receiving news of his children, 'it seemed to me that he was very angry about it', as well as his delight on other occasions.<sup>31</sup> After the arrival of the young Mary, Queen of Scots (1542–1587), at the French court, Diane could inform Humières that Henri 'particularly wants Madame Ysabel and the Queen of Scotland lodged together'.<sup>32</sup> 'I advise you that the King was marvellously pleased with the good welcome that monsieur the *dauphin* made for the Queen of Scotland'.<sup>33</sup> In such ways, Henri became a constant presence in much of her correspondence.

However, Diane also made her proximity to the king explicit in ways that demonstrated the particular intimacy of their relationship. To Antoinette de Bourbon, mother of the Duke of Guise, Diane closed one handwritten letter thus: 'In finishing this letter, the king has arrived, and commands

31 'il ma semble que mons en estoit tout fasche', Joinville 27 October [1546], BnF, ms. fr. 3155, fol. 18<sup>r</sup>.

32 'Ledict Sr veult nommement que madame Ysabel et la Roynie d'escosse soient logees ensemble', Tarare, 3 October [1548], BnF, ms. fr. 3128, fol. 10<sup>r</sup>.

33 'je vous advise que le Roy a este merueilleusement aise du bon recueil que mons le Daulphin a faict a la Roynie d'Escosse [...]. Moulins, 20 October [1548], BnF, ms. fr. 3128, fol. 14<sup>r</sup>.



me to make his recommendations to you'.<sup>34</sup> To the Constable, whom Diane carefully offered respect, letters also explicitly reminded him of her access to the king's thoughts and feelings. In acknowledging receipt of the Constable's letter to her during his captivity in 1558–59, Diane made clear that she had in fact more significant conduits to knowledge of his activities. 'I was very pleased to hear your good news, even though I knew it well, for the king had written to me of his happiness in seeing you and how well you were'.<sup>35</sup> It was not that Diane was simply close enough to the king at court to observe his responses to particular situations; her letters gave her readers clear evidence of her own involvement as a source of information for him too. In an early letter to Jean de Humières while Henri was still *dauphin*, for example, Diane could write:

I want to advise you that in reading your letter, monsieur le *dauphin* [Henri] took it, looked at it and found within it how you had decided to leave for St. Martin [...] he found it a little strange [...] and he asked me [why].<sup>36</sup>

According to Diane's description of these events in her letters, Henri embedded her in his communication strategy. These phrases positioned Diane as a valued component of, and a conduit for, the king's political networking.

One remarkable letter rendered the intertwined political and emotional relationship of Henri and Diane entirely explicit through both its material and textual representation. During his captivity, Montmorency received from Diane a short missive that thanked the statesman for his most recent news. Henri continued the letter in his own hand, thanking the Constable for finding the time to write personally during the intricate process of peace negotiations then underway that would culminate in the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis. Henri then textually bound himself together with 'the secretary who has completed half of my letter', Diane, in order to 'recommend

34 'An fynant sete lestre le Roy est aryve quy ma commande vous ferere ses recommandacyon', [December 1552], BnF, ms. fr. 3237, fol. 7<sup>r</sup>.

35 'jay ete byen fort ayse dentendre de vos bones noveles encores que je la seusse byen car le Roy mavoyt mande layse quil avoyt eu de vous voyr et come vous vous portyes,' [St. Germain en Laye, 20 Feb 1558–59], BnF, ms. fr. 3139, fol. 76<sup>r</sup>.

36 'Je vous veulx bien advertir que en lisant vostre lectre monsrl le daulphin la print et la regarda et trouva dedans comme vous ayez deslibere de partir ala St Martin pour le venir trouver [...] il la trouve ung peu estrange de voeir que vous vous ennuyez sy tost la/ Et ma demande le plusfort du monde que se povoit ester Je ne luy en ay sceu rendre raison [...].', Joinville, 27 October [1546], BnF, ms. fr. 3155, fol. 18<sup>r-v</sup>.



ourselves to your good grace'. Diane was left to close the letter, wishing God's blessing upon their recipient, with Henri penning the complimentary close 'Your ancient & best friends'. Each author then signed their name.<sup>37</sup> There is no further extant evidence of a regular pattern of joint authorship of this kind between Diane and Henri, despite claims reproduced in many works on Diane. That Montmorency should be the recipient of the only known example of this material demonstration of power may be significant: he was widely understood to be Diane's greatest rival for the affection and influence of the King at this period.<sup>38</sup>

## Transferring Power

While Diane's immediate source of authority and influence lay with her physical and emotional proximity to the king, a fact made clearly and repeatedly to her recipients, her letters also demonstrate concerted efforts to translate this influence into other, more long-lasting domains of power, namely, economic strength, administrative networks of personnel, and dynastic advancement. In doing so, Diane sought to transform gender-specific access to power via sexual and emotional services to the king to standard forms of authority and control utilized by aristocratic men and women.

A considerable amount of Diane's extant correspondence concerns her growing economic portfolio, notably tax incomes and land assets for herself and her children.<sup>39</sup> Diane was an experienced financial manager. She had sought and received from François I the right not to have a male guardian appointed to manage her assets during widowhood. Furthermore, she had persisted in a lengthy case and secured from the *Parlement* of Paris the right to hold the domains of her husband for her two daughters, without reversion to the crown.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, she engaged in a particular negotiation with her cousin René de Batarnay, comte du Bouchage, over the sale of land at Rouveray, near Loches, around 1550, the full and final price of which, and the rights associated with it, generated a large correspondence. The lack of clarification of the terms of the sale prompted the production of letters adopting a very different tone to those with which Diane had addressed her

37 'la segretère quy achève la moytye de ma lestre et moy nous recoumandons a vre boune grase' 'vos ansyens et mylleurs amys', BnF, ms. fr. 3139, fol. 26<sup>r</sup>.

38 Broomhall, 2018 a.

39 On the gifts she was given by Henri in taxes and special payments, see Cloulas, pp. 157–58.

40 Cloulas, pp. 87–88.

courtly interlocutors. Indeed, Du Bouchage was to discover that his 'obedient, good cousin' could readily voice anger and frustration in this context:

I am wondrously annoyed to see such a long time to bring our affairs to conclusions, which makes me send this porter to beg you to send your deliberation and what you want me still to wait on, for, from me, I want to tell you clearly by this letter, if within ten days you do not bring this to an end, I will secure it by another means, for I do not want to remain without knowing in what capacity I am there, for this has dragged on too long until now.<sup>41</sup>

These letters lacked the particular niceties and subtleties of hierarchical interplay displayed in Diane's correspondence with men at court and aristocratic women. Her claim to authority in these letters was explicit and demanded a compliance from her recipient that, in fact, had not been the case.

The employment of feeling in Diane's letters typically avoided the strong emotional rhetoric that was present in many letters of her contemporary, Catherine de Médicis, for example, but Diane did establish distinct moods and tones in her letters, partly through her emotional expression.<sup>42</sup> However, in this case, the articulation of strong feelings, particularly anger, which was more typically the expressive purview of governing men, may have formed part of a strategy to assert power over her cousin, rather than a reflection of it.<sup>43</sup> The focused attention to concrete detail in this resolutely practical side of her correspondence has generated much, generally critical, response from most of her scholars. Diane's mid-nineteenth-century editor Georges Guiffrey, for example, argued that the correspondence reveals a 'hardness of form, this aridity of sentiment' of a woman 'imperious and pressuring to demand her due, while elsewhere we see her dextrous at finding pretexts to delay when it came to loosening the strings of her purse'.<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, her more recent biographer, Ivan Cloulas, considering a crayon portrait by

41 'obeissante bonne cousine', 'je suis merveilleusement marrye de veoir sy grant a mectre fin a noz affaires qui me faict vous envoyer ce porteur pour vous pryer me mander vostre desliberation et ce que vouldrez que jatende encores Car de moy je vous veulx bien advertir par ceste lecture sy dedans dix jours vous ny mectrez une fin je y pourvoyre par autre moyen car je ne veulx plus demourer sans sçavoir en quoy jen suis, car cecy a trop trayne jusques icy', Brie-Comte-Robert, 27 August [1550?], BnF, ms. fr. 3145, fol. 49.

42 Broomhall, 2015, pp. 67–86; Broomhall, 2017a; Broomhall, forthcoming (a). The author is currently working on a monograph study about emotions in Catherine's letters.

43 Pollock; Broomhall and Van Gent.

44 Poitiers, pp. lxxxviii, 54 n. 1.

Jean Clouet, suggests that in widowhood Diane acquired a 'more calculating' gaze.<sup>45</sup> But Diane's certainly very precise attention to economic aspects of power helped to secure long-term gain from what could be potentially short-term royal favor, particularly as she had not borne the king children who could be promised entitlements into the future. Diane fought hard to secure these land rights, and then successfully passed them on to her daughters.

Interestingly, we see far less discussion in her letters about the visual and material production of power through her extensive architectural and artistic investments, particularly at Anet and Chenonceau.<sup>46</sup> None of the letters that remain are addressed to architects or craftsmen. The details of these material symbols of status are primarily documented for posterity in contemporary accounts, the publications of their architects and, particularly at Anet, in the artistic details of the buildings that visualized a narrative of the interwoven identities of its creators Henri and Diane throughout. Their meaning as demonstrations of power were attested by eye-witnesses, such as the English ambassador William Pickering who visited Anet in March 1553 and declared it 'so sumptuous and prince-like as ever I saw'.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, one letter to Montmorency in which Diane discussed her building program at Anet asserted her claims to creative significance and innovation in its construction. 'I do not know how to talk about anything but my masons. I am not losing a single hour and hope that when you come here that you will find something new to take pleasure in'.<sup>48</sup> Diane presented herself as responsible for this creative demonstration of her status. In this respect, her letter bears similarities with the concerns of other women on her era to establish status as creative agents.<sup>49</sup> Of particular note are the letters of her close contemporary Catherine de Médicis, which keenly asserted the central role of the queen in all stages of the material process.<sup>50</sup>

A further area where Diane's letters demonstrate a strategy of power conversion was in relation to appointments of her political networks. Diane celebrated victories when those among her network received appointments, as in her letter to Claude d'Urfé (1501–1558), writing that she was 'very pleased

45 Cloulas, p. 88. 'le regard s'est fait plus calculateur'.

46 Chevalier, 1864, Chevalier, 1866; 'The Chateau d'Anet'; Roussel.

47 Turnbull, 253–60.

48 'je ne vous scauroys parler que de mes massons ou je pertz une seule heure de temps / Et espere que quant viendres icy que vous y trouverez quelque chouse de nouveau / ou vous prandres plaisir', BnF, ms. fr. 3038 fol. 50<sup>r</sup>.

49 Broomhall, forthcoming (b).

50 Broomhall, 2018b.

that the abbey of St. Denis de Liseulx fell into the hands of my relative'.<sup>51</sup> With her close allies, she discussed attempts to secure positions for them, in doing so demonstrating the extent of her influence on the king. In order to reserve a benefice of the abbey of St. Barthélemy that had been earlier promised to Odet de Coligny, Cardinal de Châtillon (1517–1571), Diane explained to Jean de Humières that Henri had

already made a promise of another that, instead of this one, was given to the Cardinal de Châtillon, in recompense for one that he had given to the brother-in-law of Mademoiselle de Surgères; by this means, I recovered this one.<sup>52</sup>

There was no mistaking the role Diane expected her recipient to understand she had played in this process. Likewise, in a letter to the Duke of Guise, Diane foregrounded her significance in securing appointments via her networks, explaining that François de Meullon, Baron de Bressieu and de Ribiers, had written to her as a conduit to the Duke, seeking a position for his brother. '[F]or love of me, recommend him to the king', she wrote.<sup>53</sup>

Managing the marriages of her daughters and grand-daughters into France's most powerful families would also provide advancement of her line. Indeed, via these marriages, her descendants would, in just over a hundred years, marry into the royal family itself.<sup>54</sup> While negotiations for these marriages are not represented in Diane's extant letters, the relations that she was forging first with the Guise and then the Montmorency dynasties can be seen in the significant number of letters addressed to these recipients and the tone of such missives. In one, Diane wrote to the Duke's mother, Antoinette de Bourbon, asking her to consider Diane like 'your own sister' and one ready to do her favors.<sup>55</sup> Material qualities also conveyed the close relationships that Diane hoped to forge within this family.

51 'Ayant esté bien aise de ce qu'avez faict tumber l'abbaye de St Désir de Liseulx entre les mains de ma parente', Poitiers, p. 62, citing 5 June [1550] copy in BnF, Moreau 774 (formerly Collection de Fevret de Fontette 23), fol. 51.

52 'le dict Seignr avoit desja faict promesse dune autre qui en lieu de ceste cy a este baillee au cardinal de chastillon en recompense dune quil a baillee au beau frère de mademoiselle de Surgeres par ce moyen jay recouvert ceste cy', Vauluisant, 25 April [1548], BnF, ms. fr 3028, fol. 103<sup>r</sup>.

53 'pour lamour de moy le veulles avoir pour recommande / et en faire la requeste au roy', [Rheims, 8 July 1554], BnF, Clairambault 347, fol. 249.

54 When her descendant, Marie-Adélaïde de Savoie (1685–1712), married Louis, Duke of Burgundy, *Le Petit Dauphin* (1682–1712) in 1697, giving birth to the future Louis XV in 1710.

55 BnF, ms. fr 3237, fol. 13<sup>r</sup>; see note 28 above.

Among these was autograph correspondence. On an occasion in August 1552 when Diane was ill, she apologized to the Duke of Guise that she was not able to write in her own hand.<sup>56</sup> Diane's correspondence during the war with one of Henri's closest friends, Montmorency, presented a marked emphasis of deference. It was clear to contemporaries that Henri had formed a special bond with the older courtly figure, bestowing upon him many courtly privileges. Montmorency was also leader of an opposing dynastic faction to the Guise. However, Diane's correspondence reflected a rhetoric of humility in discussions of military engagement with the statesman. Diane, Montmorency's 'humble friend', expressed concern about Henri's safety at the front, advising that the king needed to be 'better guarded than ever, as much from poisons as from artillery'.<sup>57</sup> These were quasi-wifely concerns that situated Montmorency as the superior in his relations with Diane, but nonetheless insisted implicitly upon her right to information and consideration among the king's intimate circle. By the end of the period in which she was influential, Diane had ensured that her descendants were tied to this powerful dynastic family.

In the days after Henri's death, when Diane had retired from the court, it was precisely these networks that she sought to activate through letters to assist her. She wrote to Montmorency more than once to seek his assistance to ensure the financial security of her family. 'I wrote to you before to beg you to aid my son Aumale [the son of the Duke of Guise] and my daughter Bouillon, regarding the gift that the late king Henri had made to them before on salt, so as to have the gift confirmed', she wrote in the months after the king's fatal accident.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, one of Diane's letters demonstrated what appears to be rare acknowledgment of just how her position of immediate access and thus influence had transformed after the king's death. To the Duke of Guise, who had by the early 1560s risen to become Grand Master, she wrote deferentially, 'I beg that my letter not be an occasion to bother you, coming from a place which is now so troublesome'.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless the

56 Poitiers, pp. 106–07, citing Villers-Cotteretz, 30 August [1552], BnF, ms. fr. 20515 (formerly Gaignières 403), fol. 122.

57 'le myeux garder que jamès, tant des poyssons que de l'artylerye', 'vostre humble bonne amye', Poitiers, pp. 101–02, citing [June 1552] BnF, ms. fr. 2974, fol. 83.

58 'je vous ay cy-devant escript pour vous supplier ester aydant à on filz d'Aumalle & à ma fille de Buillon, touchant le don que le feu roy Henry leur a cy-devant faict sr le sel, affin de faire confirmer le don', Poitiers, p. 177, citing Paris, 25 Nov [1559], BnF, ms. fr. 20507 (formerly Gaignières 395), fol. 97.

59 'je vous suplye, que ma lestre ne soyt aucasyon de vous annuyer, venant dung lyeu quy est mentenant sy fâcheux', Poitiers, p. 187, citing [1563?] BnF, ms. fr. 20507 (formerly Gaignières 395), fol. 147.

missive simultaneously sought to enact advantage from the very networks that her former power had enabled her to create. Diane continued to seek means to provide services and favors to these dynastic families. She wrote to Madeleine de Savoie (c. 1510–1586), wife of Montmorency, to announce that she could help procure a piece of land that she had heard the Montmorencys wanted: 'begging you to believe that what I do is nothing more than the goodwill that I have to see you accommodated with that good and to give pleasure to you in anything that is ever possible for me to do'. The missive made clear that she could do so, by relying on a network of supporters that she had developed at the height of her power, having, by her own account, instructed d'Urfé to sell the land to them. 'I wanted to write a little word about it to him, advising him to put it in your hands'.<sup>60</sup> These latter letters to the Guise and Montmorency family members provide evidence of Diane's continued expectations of reliance on their support in her latter years and the sustained impact of the elite network that she had cultivated during her years at the apex of courtly power.

## Conclusion: Writing Power

An analysis of the letters of Diane de Poitiers provides important insights into the epistolary strategies of a woman whose status, authority, and influence emerged not from a formal position but a far more precarious source, the affections of a king. As such, they demonstrate particular attention to rhetorical positioning that made explicit the intimate and emotionally powerful nature of the relationship that Diane shared with the king. Diane's missives show the specific ways in which a mistress could insert herself into matters of national significance that extended from overseeing those tasked to the royal nursery and the courtly machinations surrounding appointments, to international political negotiations and European battlefields. They also reveal the way in which letters could be used to reveal, sustain, and expand a significant network of allies who, it was hoped, could be relied upon in potentially changing (and detrimental) circumstances, as indeed occurred in Diane's case. Correspondence became then, for Diane, another tool in

60 'vous suppliant de penser que ce que jen faiz nest que bonne volunte que jay de vous veoir accommodee de ce bien la et de vous faire plaisir en tout ce qui me fera james possible', 'je luy en ay bien voullu toucher ung mot, luy conseillant de la mectre entre voz mains', [1564?], BnF, ms. fr. 3119, fol. 66<sup>r</sup>.

a strategy to transfer psychic power to more stable and long-term forms, particularly economic security and dynastic advancement.

However, Diane's letters also bear out similarities with other contemporary women at the apex of courtly influence such as queens and regents, because some aspects — assumptions and activities — of the experiences of women with courtly power were more widespread. The performance of power was gendered, and thus the nature of women's influence was often most clearly exercised in unofficial capacities that were well recognized by contemporaries as vital components of the political system. Many of these roles, which included conveying and exchanging information, offering services that advanced the careers of men and placed them in official appointments from where they could offer support to women, and through emotional work that smoothed, enhanced and fostered relationships, were conducted, and remain most visible to historians, through correspondence.

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## About the author

**Susan Broomhall** is Professor of Early Modern History at The University of Western Australia. She is author or co-author of eight monographs and ten edited volumes exploring women and gender, power, and most recently emotions and material culture, from late medieval to nineteenth-century Europe, although the particular focus of her work is early modern France and the Low Countries. She has published *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ashgate, 2002), *Women's Medical Work in Early Modern France* (Manchester University Press/ Palgrave, 2004), *Women and Religion in Sixteenth-Century France* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and most recently (with Jacqueline Van Gent), *Gender, Power and Identity in the Early Modern House of Orange-Nassau* (Routledge, 2016), and *Dynastic Colonialism: Gender, Materiality and the Early Modern House of Orange-Nassau* (Routledge, 2016). She holds an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship, researching emotions and power in the correspondence of Catherine de

Médicis. From this research, she has published a series of book chapters and articles, and is currently writing a monograph on emotions in Catherine de Médici's letters for Brill. From 2018, she leads a major Australian Research Council project, with Carolyn James and Lisa Mansfield, 'Gendering the Italian Wars, 1494–1559'.