



Passionate Protector

King Henry IV of France, who reigned in the latter part of the 16th century and the early years of the 17th, was before his coronation only the leader of a Protestant faction in France. This faction was a small but disproportionately dynamic group, fighting desperately – and often successfully – against domination by more numerous Catholic antagonists. Before Henry’s accession to the throne, he was king of the small southern principality of Navarre, nestled between France and Spain. For Henry to consolidate his hold on the crown and the people of France, he had to buttress his hereditary claim with victories on the battlefield. He championed, not the dominance of Catholics by Protestants, but rather a coalition of both religions’ adherents, dedicated to tolerance and nationalism above confessional divisions. Yes, Henry was an enlightened champion of tolerance, and no doubt a gifted military strategist, but he was also wildly promiscuous, jumping from bed to bed whenever the sheets were within reach.

Perhaps the most striking example of a conflict between passion and leadership occurred after the Battle of Coutras. Henry’s armed coalition had crushed the intolerant Catholic League and seemed bent on moving quickly to establish firm control over the entire kingdom. However, no sooner had Henry led his troops to victory than he disappeared for days, throwing himself into sexual escapades in his provisional capital of Nérac. Instead of leading his troops on to Paris and decisively defeating their opposition, Henry neglected his duty for pursuit of pleasure. Needless to say, his allies were demoralized by this collapse of leadership, and his enemies were equally shocked that he would let them regroup without opposition. This state of affairs led to a lengthening of their bloody civil

war and risked the failure of Henry's quest to rule all of France as a tolerant, unifying symbol of national reconciliation.

But just as abruptly as Henry had abandoned his responsibilities after Coutras, in times to come he repeatedly rose again to lead his soldiers to military victories and his political allies to progressively closer approximations of a monarchy that was religiously neutral. Henry had a stellar education, far beyond what most potentates of his era possessed, including significant moral education, based on the Greek and Roman classics, as well as ample Christian texts. He surprised scholars by showing interest in the minutiae of their debates and was a devoted advocate of reason as a guide to use of power. Yet he repeatedly failed to rein in his own passions, causing repeated ruptures of relationships with innumerable women – some wealthy and influential – resulting in costly distractions and ongoing damage to his high-minded political and intellectual ideals.

Some say Henry, who struggled with a variety of physical infirmities, was striving to overcompensate for his weakness by showcasing not only military bravado but also sexual virility. Others observed that he never raped anyone, and his partners – at least in the initial phases of infatuation – seems exceedingly willing to fall into his arms. But the fact remains that Henry paid a price in loyalty when devoutly religious Protestants and Catholics, who shared his tolerant views, were alienated from the kind of dedication they might have given a more focused and ethically consistent champion. And many thousands died because Henry prolonged a civil war that might have ended much sooner, if he had only controlled his passions. In any case, by 1598, he had finally succeeded in pacifying the country and, until his assassination in 1610, he served as one of the most enlightened royal reformers in the history of France.

Paul Eckert
June 1, 2020
Washington, DC