This chapter explores women’s participation in religious politics, particularly in the second half of the sixteenth century, when religious differences were transformed into violent conflict in many parts of France. In recent years, historians have increasingly looked to understand women’s involvement in political action by terms that take into account the context of female opportunities for power. Research by Sharon Kettering, for example, has questioned the extent of noblewomen’s powerlessness in the light of their involvement in domestic patronage and household service and politics. Robert J. Kalas’s case study of the career of Jeanne de Gontault noted how her ceremonial role at court serving the Valois queens gave her the opportunity to voice opinions to the queens in a ‘female world … where some degree of political power was possible for the wealthy, landed elite’. Kristen Neuschel’s study of noblewomen in times of war argues that they participated in warfare in important material and symbolic ways. This chapter expands such arguments to examine how women of diverse social levels found means to contribute to political actions or military manoeuvres, and to demonstrate their allegiances to the political factions. It contends that women at all levels experienced the devastation to property and lives wrought by the religious violence and sought to express responses with the means at their disposal.

**Women and national religious politics**

Women entered into debates on a national scale, often through publication, about the religious troubles that France experienced during the sixteenth century. Several women in the royal family were actively involved in politics despite the fact that Salic law prevented them from
ascending the throne. Anne de France was unofficial regent for her brother, Charles VIII, during his minority. Louise de Savoie was twice regent for her son, François I. Her granddaughter, Jeanne d’Albret, ruled the neighbouring territory of Navarre to the south of France and led the Reformed faction. Catherine de Medici, as regent and Queen Mother, played a dominant role during the period of the religious wars whilst her sons ruled.

Despite the presence of powerful women in French political life, contemporaries were uncomfortable with the concept of female political participation. Chronicler Pierre de l’Estoile recorded in his notebooks many of the popular verses circulating in Paris during the religious fighting. Some particularly criticised female political action, such as that of Catherine de Medici, as did ‘the Verses against the Italians’ which circulated in Paris in July 1575:

Those Gallic fathers, formerly unconquered,
Would blush with shame, even if conquered
By a brave, honoured warrior who ruled in Rome.
But we without shame submit supinely
While a woman masters us entirely.
When a woman rules, it is a coward’s home.\(^5\)

None the less, certain women sought to celebrate the value of female advice and influence in the past for their own purposes. Catherine des Roches reminded Henri III that kings had been successfully guided by the words of women in the past: ‘To punish the English and rebel subjects, one of our Kings heeded the advice of a Maiden.’\(^6\) Having recalled Jeanne d’Arc, Des Roches continued: ‘Thus I beg you to hear what your virtue divinely inspires in my poor mind.’\(^7\) Catherine des Roches proceeded to extol the virtues of a benevolent king, praising Henri’s attributes, to which she significantly included ‘the virtuous love of your wise mother’.\(^8\) While many male political commentators abhorred the Queen Mother’s political actions, Catherine lauded Henri and Catherine de Medici’s intense maternal–filial relationship of advice and love, which mirrored her own with her mother, Madeleine.

Women, especially royal women, contributed a discernable political presence and often exercised an audible voice on matters of national religious politics. Women in the royal family were more able than other women to document their contribution to the religio-political situation. Jeanne d’Albret and Catherine de Medici in particular harnessed the power of the press for propaganda purposes. Women skilfully negotiated...