In the early fourteenth century, the kingdoms of England and France were in conflict over the issue of women’s power to transmit heritable rule in their own right. The disposition of France’s throne hung in the balance. In 1316, Philip of Poitiers, the brother of the reigning king Louis X and future Philip V of France set out to disinherit his infant niece, Jeanne, of the French throne, setting the stage for eventual conflict with England. From 987, with the establishment of the Capetian monarchy until the death of Louis X in 1316, no French king had failed before to provide a son who survived his father’s death. The question of female eligibility for the throne had thus never been broached, giving Philip an opportunity to argue for the exclusion of women from succession, yet no clear precedent from which to base that argument. In the absence of a legal precedent, Philip cast about for a way to invalidate Jeanne’s claim to the throne.

As an infant female, and quite possibly illegitimate due to her mother’s well-known indiscretions, Jeanne presented French aristocrats with a somewhat unappealing candidate for the throne, yet Louis X had publicly acknowledged her as his legitimate child. Philip was left in a peculiar bind. Prominent medical discourses based in Aristotelian biology supported his claim by suggesting that only men could inherit and transmit seed. As a daughter, Jeanne should then be ineligible to claim a birthright to her father’s throne through blood, and even if she herself inherited by right of her relation to her father, her own children would carry the blood of her husband, effectively spelling the end of the Capetian royal line. As Louis’s brother, Philip appeared a much better choice for
the throne; as a man, he could both carry and transmit that bloodline to his own heirs. However, Philip could not employ this argument without significant difficulty and embarrassment, as he had himself previously petitioned Louis X to allow his own patrimony to pass to his daughter in the case that his sons died, appealing to “reason and natural law” to support the right of daughters to inherit in the absence of brothers.  

Through negotiation and outright bribery, Philip eventually successfully disinherited Jeanne, and French lawmakers passed, without elaboration upon its grounding, a law that simply stated that a woman could not rule France in her own name, leaving a rationale of dynastic inheritance and the position of women therein rather murky. The episode highlights the equivocal position of women in fourteenth-century patrilineal discourse and the often complicated negotiations of coexisting yet contradictory ideas regarding women’s participation in bloodlines and the high stakes involved when bloodline transmission offered a rationale for property transmission.

Women’s ambivalent status in relation to genealogy—their disputed ability to carry and transmit the patriline—returned dramatically to plague France in the 1337 claim of Edward to the throne of France through his mother, Isabelle, the last surviving child of Philip IV. So long successful in producing male heirs to the throne, the kings of the Capetian line suddenly failed to do so twice more in the span of 12 years. In the second instance, however, a direct male descendent of the primary Capet line did exist. Awkwardly for the French, this descendant happened to be the current king of England. Accordingly, the English based their claim to the French throne in the premise that a woman could in fact inherit and transmit her father’s bloodline to her son. If this model of genealogical transmission was recognized, then Edward III of England (r. 1327–1377), the only direct grandson of Philip IV of France, became the clear rightful heir to the throne of France after each of his three maternal uncles died heirless. In 1337, years after the last of these uncles, Charles the Fair, had died, Edward III claimed the throne on behalf of his mother’s right, challenging the legitimacy of Philip VI’s rulership. For their part, the French understandably wished no part of an English king ruling France and thus they claimed that a woman was not only ineligible to claim the right of the crown for herself but also could not transmit the claim to the French throne to her children. With this justification, the French had chosen Charles the Fair’s cousin Philip of Valois (then Philip VI) as the new king of France in 1328, bypassing Edward III, the only remaining direct male descendant of Philip the Fair. The maneuverings of both France and England around the question of the potential for the female transmission of a bloodline reveal not only the high stakes involved in the claim for