



A Risky Business? Representing Catherine de' Medici's silk Entrepreneurialism

Susan Broomhall, Australian Catholic University, Susan.Broomhall@acu.edu.au

Abstract

This essay explores the representation of Catherine de' Medici, queen of France, in her activities related to moriculture, sericulture and silk work manufacture in sixteenth-century France. In a 1602 publication encouraging entrepreneurial leadership in France's emerging silk industry, Barthélemy de Laffemas proposed Catherine as an exemplar. In doing so, Laffemas, just as Catherine before him, had to navigate firstly how an early modern woman and a queen could engage with emerging business opportunities when contemporary assumptions rendered the association of women and queens to entrepreneurship almost inconceivable, and secondly what a queen's example specifically could offer to both France's male ruler and wider publics.

Keywords: Entrepreneurialism, Catherine de' Medici, Silk Industry, France, Gender

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Introduction

In 1602, the one-time tailor now gentleman of the king's bedchamber under Henri IV (1553–1610), Barthélemy de Laffemas (1545–1612), published an account of the interventions of Catherine de' Medici (1519–89), French queen and powerful courtly influence as mother of three kings. The work aimed to encourage the development of the silk industry, as moriculture, sericulture and silk-work manufacture, in the French kingdom. It was a risky proposition. After her death in 1589, the queen's posthumous reputation had suffered by her engagement with a very large number of ambitious projects that had left significant debt. Many were unfinished and much was rapidly dismantled and re-purposed. Yet Laffemas's publication, *Lettres et exemples de la feu Royne mere, comme elle faisoit travailler aux manufactures, et fournissoit aux ouvriers de ses propres deniers*, placed the queen as an example in his campaign to establish domestic production of silk fiber and thus independent silk work manufacture, in France.

Laffemas, a tailor turned merchant, and a sericultural advocate with the ear of the king, Henri IV, produced a slew of publications from the late 1590s and into the first decades of the seventeenth century, arguing his case to break France's reliance on raw materials from Italy and Spain. In 1602, the year of his publication profiling Catherine de' Medici's activities, he had been appointed the king's General Controller of Commerce and President of the newly formed Council of Commerce. It followed an edict promulgated in 1599 to prohibit the importation of foreign silk, which had been quickly repealed, in part because there was no sustained local production and infrastructure at scale with which to replace it. Laffemas' work both described Catherine's investments and incorporated the text of a letter purportedly sent by her in 1582 to the mayor and council of Orléans, a town within lands over which she had authority. Here, she appeared to detail the economic conditions that she expected the council to put in place to facilitate the development of a silk working industry and implantation of foreign workers bringing necessary skills to the town. Importantly, to support the fledgling enterprise, the letter showed Catherine as prepared to commit her own finances to the endeavor. "How she set industry to work and provided for the workers with her own means" was foregrounded as a praiseworthy example in the work's title. Although the short work also described other investments made by Laffemas' contemporaries, the queen was featured and her activities précised in its title. To date, her inclusion and representation in this campaign has not been examined in the context of women's entrepreneurial engagement with silk manufacture or the gender dimensions of silk entrepreneurialism at the turn of the seventeenth century. Analyzing why Laffemas might have considered the example of Catherine de' Medici productive to these ambitions and what his work suggests of the queen's practices deserves consideration. It offers insights about how, firstly, gender assumptions shaped and differentiated the business behaviors of women and a queen; and secondly, what a queen's example could offer to France's male rulers and wider publics respectively.

Catherine de' Medici, who had died a little over a decade earlier, hardly seemed the most promising example of entrepreneurship in early seventeenth-century France. She had been queen of France, as consort of Henri II (1519–59), and remained a highly influential figure in the reigns of her three sons, François II (1544–60), Charles IX (1550–74) and Henri III (1551–89), who ruled France across almost the entire second half of the sixteenth century. Catherine had access to considerable dower funds that enabled her to explore many architectural, artistic and horticultural projects as well as business opportunities on the estates over which she held authority (Susan Broomhall 2021, 263–98). However, at her death and even before it, detractors had critiqued these ambitious projects and hefty expenditure as evidence of her profligacy and her lack of emotional

control. Beyond her reputation, there was also little remaining evidence for contemporaries to judge Catherine's abilities as a discerning businesswoman, for few of the ventures to which the queen invested funds came to successful fruition in her lifetime or subsequently, including her ventures into the promotion of domestic silk fiber and silk work production. Yet Laffemas' presentation of Catherine's activities seemed to offer an alternative narrative, one in which the queen's activities became evidence of calculated risk-taking and her failures showed the importance of national support. Laffemas seemed to suggest that the queen's spirit of large-scale investment was precisely the kind of disposition needed to be undertaken by entrepreneurs to cultivate the silk industry in France. This essay explores how Laffemas' work positioned the queen as an active agent in the management of her finances and thoroughly enmeshed in the detail of business activities that she aimed to support, all without naming her as an "entrepreneur". His publication appeared in an era when silk's new advocates positioned women and men for distinct roles as participants in a local silk industry that they hoped to see flourish. This essay therefore explores, more broadly, how entrepreneurialism was conceptualized in gender-distinct terms, and how Laffemas, and Catherine before him, presented the idea of involvement by a woman, a royal woman, in emerging business opportunities.

The question of how early modern women and queens could engage as entrepreneurs underpins this essay's analysis, just as it did the contemporary representations by Catherine and Laffemas. This was because the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conceptualizations of an entrepreneur and a queen embedded assumptions about women and men, femininity and masculinity, as well as public good, pleasure and profit-making, which this essay seeks to disentangle. The documentation of historical entrepreneurs is patchy. The term, entrepreneur, is primarily associated with the eighteenth-century Irish-French economic theorist Richard Cantillon (1680–1734), but it was already in use a century earlier, including in Laffemas' publications and those of his contemporaries as will be explored below. Mark Casson and Catherine Casson (2014, 1227–8) observe that successful entrepreneurial actors in the English-speaking world operating in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are best known. Yet an early modern literature that examines innovators, promoters and experimenters offers cognate material to build a longer and deeper history of entrepreneurial activity (Joan Thirsk 1997).

Additionally, the historical entrepreneurial practices of women are still less well explored than those of men. Important analyses of women operating in mainly British urban environments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have deepened our knowledge of how women experienced and engaged with entrepreneurial practices (Hannah Barker 2006; Béatrice Craig 2016; Alison C. Kay 2009; Nicola Phillips 2006). A further series of economic studies has sought to nuance the concept of work, labor and participation in the economy in relation to women's activities across the early modern period (Maria Ågren 2017; Elise M. Dermineur 2018; Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis, and Manuela Martini 2018; Catriona Macleod, Alexandra Shepard, and Maria Ågren 2023). Collectively, studies of such women reveal patterns of constraints upon them, including gender assumptions that limited their ability, even as elites and as queens, to act entrepreneurially as this was understood by contemporaries (Broomhall 2022; Broomhall and Clare Davidson 2025). Although T.A.B. Corley (2006, 145) lamented economic scholarship's move away from the "difficult concepts of big business and entrepreneurship into the more seductive topics of class, gender, race, culture and the environment", such intersectional identity markers acted as factors in individuals' ability to engage in entrepreneurial behaviors. To analyze why Laffemas represented Catherine as he did, this essay first considers the queen's activities in the context of women's participation in sixteenth-century sericultural endeavors. It then examines

the call for entrepreneurs to foster domestic silk production at the time of Laffemas' intervention at the turn of the seventeenth century and the centrality of gender assumptions in characterizing the entrepreneurs of moriculture and sericulture specifically in the works of its leading advocates. The final section turns to investigate Laffemas' representation of the queen's activities in the silk industry in terms of his, and her, own making.

Courting women in French silk in the sixteenth century

Attempts at creating a domestic supply of silk for local manufacture of silk work began in the fifteenth century with royal support when Louis XI (1423–83), first in 1466 for Lyon and shortly after in Tours, had permitted silk-work to be produced from imported materials. For more than one hundred years, attempts were made to establish moriculture, the cultivation of mulberry trees, and sericulture, the production of raw silk fiber, in the French kingdom, providing the base material from which a flourishing silk working industry could develop. Mulberry trees, the leaves of which were the unique source of sustenance of *bombyx mori*, were already grown in Italian and Spanish climes. Sericulture's seventeenth-century advocates recounted to their readers how it had been Charles VIII (1470–98) who had seen the profit to be made from silkworms while on his military conquest in Italy in the kingdom of Naples and had thus ordered mulberry trees to be planted in Provence (Serres 1600, 457).

These early initiatives were explored and exploited by those at the French court, where women in the king's orbit enjoyed the means and access to sericulture's emerging opportunities. Royal residences served as sites for experimentation with mulberry trees, white and black, providing useful testing grounds in different terrains and microclimates to identify suitable environments for these trees. A payment was made in March 1536, for example, to a gardening expert to advise the gardeners of the royal château of Blois how to care for and transfer white mulberry trees to another royal residence at Fontainebleau (Pierre Lesueur 1906, 244–5, fn 2). As experiments with carefully cultivated mulberry species were costly investments, the involvement of courtly women in France as early adopters on lands over which they held control is not surprising. In 1546, the Venetian ambassador Marino Cavalli reported to the Senate that in Tours 8,000 people were employed in silk-working, using raw silk that came from Italy and Spain. He noted, however, that the French were also experimenting with planting mulberry trees and raising silkworms, exploring what the local environment would permit them to achieve (Niccolò Tommaseo 1838, 258; André Coudouin 1981, 57). In an intriguing, but frustratingly unfinished passage, Cavalli makes reference to the contribution of a queen who had sponsored the silk industry in Tours, "and so it has increased until the present" (Tommaseo 1838, 258).¹ Cavalli may have intended Louise de Savoie (1476–1531), never a queen but who acted as regent for her son, François I (1494–47), who held the city in her dower domain until her death in 1531. Records indicate that she certainly supported silk-working at Tours with accounts showing payments for workers in 1523 (Coudouin 1981, 44).

French kings contributed by establishing a framework for investment. In July 1551, Henri II had begun to regulate and extend the sites where mulberry trees were planted across the kingdom. A declaration outlined that the new measure would allow identification of suitable terrain for the planting of mulberry trees coordinated by the newly appointed royal "spinner and maker of silk" Antoine Carras, and his four assistants (Roseline Claerr 2022, 307). Carras' position appeared similar to the national coordinating role that Laffemas would later occupy under Henri

¹ All translations are my own.

IV (Grégoire Charlot 1860, 39). Providing attention to the manufacturing of silk, in April 1554, Henri confirmed the privileged status of silk workers in Lyon and sought to institute detailed regulations, explaining in the document's preamble the importance of self-sustaining industries in France so that the kingdom was not required to access materials from elsewhere, even sourced from providers who were "very often our enemies" (Claerr 2020, 203). Henri also supported local fledgling attempts to set up sericulture that would form a basis for an indigenous silk industry. He granted permission to Jean Baillin, a merchant from Toulouse, to create a company with Alexandre Salviny to establish the production of silk in that town from locally produced silk, providing him the same exemptions that were enjoyed by the workers of Tours, Lyon and Paris (Marie-Noëlle Baudouin-Matuszek 2001).

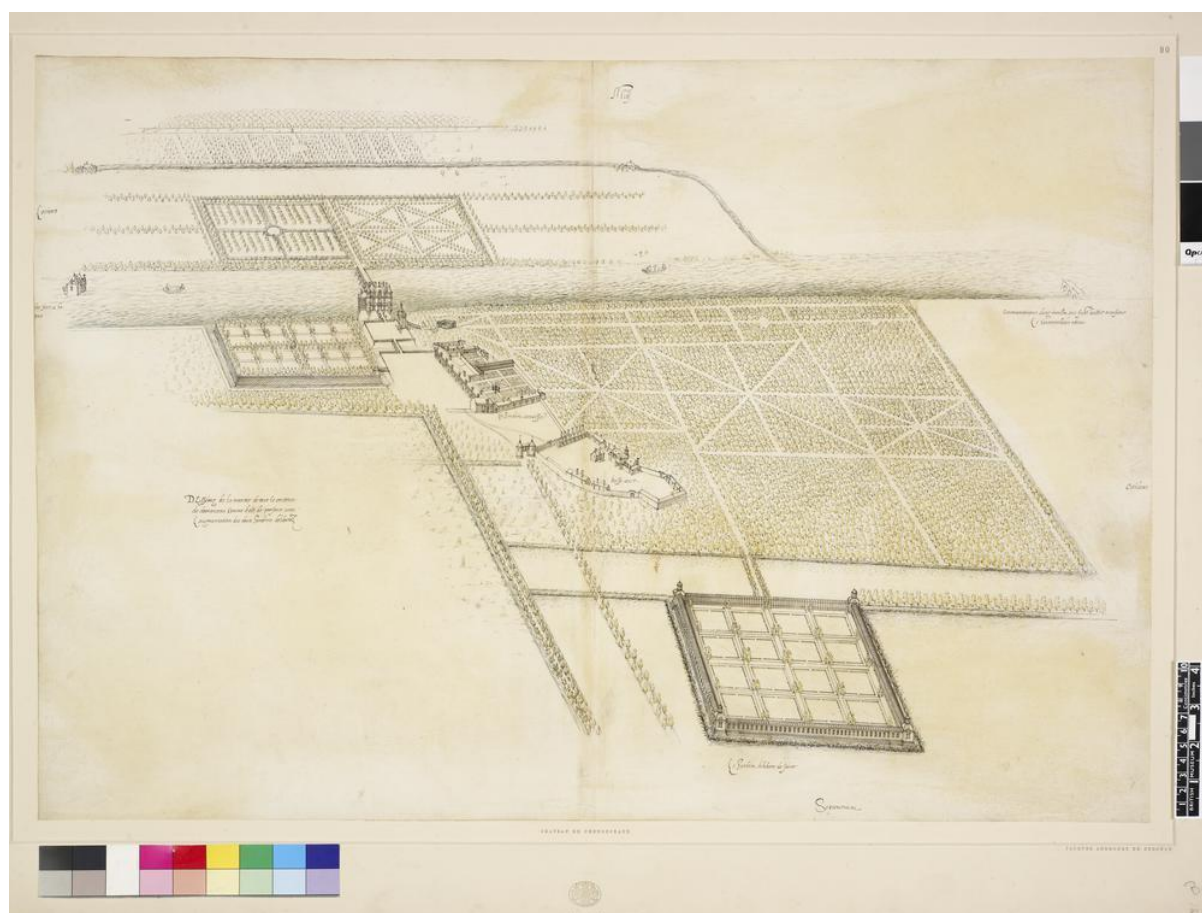
Royal and courtly women again acted as important entrepreneurs responding to the regulation and foundations that a king could set in train, including the two most significant women of his court, his wife Catherine de' Medici and his long-term companion Diane de Poitiers (1500–66). Each used lands and towns held in their name to foster aspects of the silk industry. In 1554, Diane had 150 mulberry trees planted in the garden at her château de Chenonceau (Chevalier 1864a, 149–50, 159; 1868, 274). In early 1557, the trees planted by Diane several years earlier appear to have been transplanted from the garden to a new site "on the warren" in the Chenonceau estate (Chevalier 1864a, 218). After the death of Henri II, his widow Catherine de' Medici took possession of Chenonceau in 1559 and further developed its sericultural operations.

At Chenonceau, Catherine de' Medici, now queen mother, appeared to establish an integrated suite of silk-work activities. Catherine increased mulberry tree plantation and established a silk-weaving workshop at nearby Francueil (Alfred Boulay de la Meurthe 1900, 181, 170–84). A list of payments to workers at Chenonceau in the accounts of March 1562, managed by Lambert de Baronville, the captain and governor of Chenonceau, who had been "commissioned by the said lady to order the repairs and make the purchases and transactions," indicates that sericultural activities were identified as a distinct kind of labor that were noted and itemized specifically. A certain Pierre Latart, for example, was paid "to plant and manage the white mulberry trees and to plant other trees at Chenonceau" (Etienne Faisant 2015, 56). Elsewhere seven men were paid a total of 7 *livres* 8 *sols tournois* for their work on the grounds specially to "prepare the topsoil of the green parterre, plant the cypresses in it, and to plant the little mulberry trees in a large piece of ground that joins the warren of Glon" (Faisant 2015, 56). Additionally, carriers were paid two *sols tournois* a day to "carry good topsoil to the base of the mulberry trees" (Faisant 2015, 56). These records suggest that moriculture was afforded specific attention, although it constituted only a relatively small investment within the total sum for works at the estate in this account, which amounted to some 896 *livres* (Faisant 2015, 57).

Catherine de' Medici died in 1589 and Chenonceau passed to her daughter-in-law, Louise de Lorraine (1553–1601). In 1600, a survey of the Chenonceau estates provided evidence of former activity in some silk manufacture, such as the Manoir des Houdes where, the minutes noted, "the silk workers and spinners used to work" (Chevalier 1862, 60; 1868, 413). The accounts of 1603, when the château was in the possession of Françoise de Lorraine, Duchess of Mercœur (1592–1669), recorded the purchase of silkworm eggs, their care and supply of food, costs of labor to collect the leaves, and pay to the "woman who spun the silk", but it did not appear an economically robust affair, achieving a recorded profit amounting to 60 *livres* (Chevalier 1864b, 150, 212–13; 1868, 432). Evidence of silk-working activities was captured incidentally in the account, noting that wines were stored "in the cellar of the base court under the main building where silkworms are accustomed to be raised" and in payments to cut the grass "in the field where the mulberry

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trees are, next to the old fulling mill” (Chevalier 1864b, 227, 136). This account suggests that the mulberry trees were planted on the left bank of the château, at Francueil, where two large, formal parterres were constructed as part of Catherine’s garden works. As Faisant (2015, 54) has argued, these were likely to be the garden developments described in Chenonceau’s 1565 property register as having been “newly constructed”. If so, the mulberry trees may have been planted in the narrow southern fields sketched in the 1570 drawings that Jacques Androuet du Cerceau (1515–84) prepared for his later publication, *Les plus excellents bastiments de France* (1576–79) on the southern side of the estate where two building with waterwheels are shown, perhaps one the fulling mill later described in the 1603 account. Du Cerceau’s image also depicts the base court where silkworms were similarly later recorded as having been housed. (Fig. 1) This archival evidence appears to suggest that Catherine had developed a business model of vertical integration at Chenonceau, where control of the production of raw materials through to the finished article formed part of the vision. At the same time, the Chenonceau archives suggest that the operation had not forged a flourishing industry, some aspects were no longer active, and what remained under those who held the estate after her death appeared relatively modest.



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Figure 1.

Chateau de Chenonceaux, one of a group of 122 drawings of French chateaux related to but not etched in the artist's *Les plus excellents bastiments de France*, 1576–79; bird's eye view (from the NW) of the chateau, river, formal gardens, parkland and wood.

As the sixteenth century drew to a close, women in close proximity to the king were among those who experimented with moriculture, sericulture and silk work manufacture on lands under their control, acting in ways consistent with modern understanding of entrepreneurial behaviors. Yet neither they nor indeed their male counterparts had achieved the sustainable and scaled-up nation-wide industry of which seventeenth-century advocates were to dream.

Entrepreneurs and Sericulture: Pleasure, Profit, and Public Good

The activities of Catherine de' Medici seem to justify modern characterization as entrepreneurial, yet Laffemas, despite suggesting her as an example, never named her as such. To understand why he showcased her activities in a work encouraging entrepreneurs in the silk industry yet never used that term for her actions, we must explore how assumptions about gender and status were embedded in contemporary ideas about entrepreneurial investment in silk. Laffemas numbered among a small but passionate group of promoters who saw an opportunity for France to produce a material that was then a costly import (Jean-Baptiste Vérot 2019; 2023). Laffemas was an ardent advocate who disseminated his ideas in a wide range of printed publications through the last decade of the sixteenth century, setting out his belief in the detrimental economic burden of imports and the benefits of producing silk within France (Barthélemy de Laffemas 1597, 1598, 1601). Laffemas is well known to intellectual and economic historians, where he is considered a dynamic early advocate of French mercantilism. (Charles Woolsey Cole 1931, 63–112; Henri Hauser 1927, 161–180; Charles Pradel 1890, 390–95; Erik S. Reinert and Philipp Robinson Rössner 2023; Vérot 2023, 39–110) Laffemas' work presenting the queen's silk manufacturing activities is consistent with the focus of his many other publications yet rarely referenced. Laffemas was an influence upon the 1599 edict that briefly prohibited the importation of foreign silk, threatening the powerful silk-working industry in Lyon which thrived on the imported raw material (Richard Gascon 1971). Under Henri IV, a small team of advocates pushed for a more concerted plan to plant mulberry trees and to provide a coordinated approach to engage investors at local levels, which would render France independent of costly imported raw materials, a moricultural and sericultural agenda in which they were personally and professionally invested. (Vérot 2019)

These advocates generally shared views on the role they imagined women and men could play in advancing this endeavor. Olivier de Serres (1539–1619), a Huguenot gentleman farmer from the Vivarais region, published a comprehensive account of sericultural practice, commissioned by Henri IV, *La Cueillette de la soye par la nourriture des vers qui la font* in 1599. This work gained further exposure when republished soon after in his *Théâtre d'Agriculture et mesnage des champs* in 1600. In assuring individual men that they could create a “start-up” in silk, Serres was keen to emphasize profit from minimal outlay. Women and queens were not his imagined entrepreneurs; his target reader was the “father of the family” who could turn a profit by managing a suite of family members and paid laborers (Olivier de Serres 1600, 462). The new promoters saw women as valuable workers in the industry, not least because they were cheaper than adult men. Thus, like Serres, Jean-Baptiste Le Tellier (1603, 11), a Parisian silk merchant commissioned by Henri IV in 1602 to investigate conditions suitable to develop sericulture, assured his readers that “there is hardly anything to get together, because there is no one other than women and children to do the work, and who are more suitable for it than men”. As Henri's *lettres patentes* of December 1602 also observed, the labor involved could be passed to “women and children [who] are as capable of this as men, and are ordinarily employed in it without distracting

them from their households” (Le Tellier 1603, n.p.; Broomhall, 2025). In considering how individual men of modest means might become entrepreneurs in silk, these authors positioned women unimaginatively as little more than a domestic labor resource, who could simply add silk work to their other household chores.

Establishing sericulture in the French kingdom, however, also required wealthy investors and here advocates diverged in explicitly considering women’s participation. Monarchs, influential courtiers, town councils, and private wealthy individuals were all in campaigners’ line of sight. Le Tellier (1603, Aij^r) celebrated the efforts of the king, Henri IV, to plant trees in the royal estates at Fontainebleau, Madrid and Tuileries “as he is desirous of the growth of his kingdom and the enrichment of his subjects,” just as Olivier de Serres (1600, 461) proposed to the town council of Paris that planting mulberry trees for the silk industry was for “public utility and the particular commodity of the town of Paris, for the manufacture of silk would nourish so many people, both its own inhabitants and poor and miserable people.” In addition, these authors (Le Tellier 1603, 27; Laffemas 1602, 8, 24) looked to other commercially-minded individuals to undertake (*entreprendre*) these developments. These authors used the term “entrepreneurs” to describe those who would take on and bear the risks to launch this unknown and uncertain endeavor, for the enterprise of establishing the art of making silk across all France, as Le Tellier (1603, Aij^r) observed, “being new will seem very strange”. The grammar of French makes the term capable of including both men and women, but as this section argues, advocates characterized the nature of women and men’s activities in ways that suggest it was men that they typically intended by the term. These calls to arms loosely distinguished between the individual who sought personal profit and the king or council whose motivations were expected to encompass the good of the realm or a town. Yet the differences were not always clear-cut. Laffemas (1603, 124) merged both when he expressed his hope to demonstrate to merchants “the good to come from it for their children and the nation”. Laffemas particularly included a moral aspect in his characterization of the entrepreneur, as an individual concerned not only with private profit but also with public good.

Authors dedicated their works to both women and men. In doing so, they showed how differently gendered individuals were conceived as having distinct characteristics that shaped their potential roles as investors in moriculture, sericulture and silk-work. François Bérolalde de Verville (1556–1626) (1600, a ij^r), for example, dedicated his versified *Histoire des vers qui filent la soye*, developed for the alderman of Tours to two distinct audiences, first and most importantly, as judged by the size of the fonts used, to “the Messieurs of Tours” and secondly, in smaller font, via a poem, to the “Ladies of Tours”. To the first cohort, he (1600, a ij^r) set out the rationale for his work, to “excite good souls to their duty, as much to enhance as to relieve their country” via the development of sericulture, a “happy project” and a “way to multiple in wealth and magnificence” their town so that Tours could receive the “title of Queens over nations”. These leading men with funds to invest also had obligations to their town, whose nymph:

Complained that her dress being still made of wool,
No one would pay any attention to the Nymph of Tours (1600, a ij^r).

If men with funds ought to invest and take risk to help their town to advance, dressing fashionably was presented as the major reason for wealthy women to be interested in a local silk industry. Bérolalde de Verville (1600, a ijr) promised elite women of Tours, his second targeted readership: “Ladies if you believe what I recount to you, and if you care to treat this information wisely, you will enjoy so much good that you will no longer be interested in the richest presents brought from

the Orient". For Béroalde de Verville, these women both promoted the industry, and could benefit economically themselves, as consumers of locally made silks that were as attractive as any imported products. However, if they were to do so by investing their own funds in sericulture, tending to the hands-on care of silkworms themselves, or simply by preferentially purchasing the luxurious commodities that this local fiber manufacture would make available to them, Béroalde de Verville did not make clear.

Some authors distinguished between the interests of women and men in the silk industry, in scale and motivation. Women who dabbled with silkworms as a pleasurable hobby contrasted men's larger-scale activity for Serres. His work pointedly distinguished between forms of sericultural engagement in gender-distinct terms. While discussing the number of mulberry trees required to establish sericulture, he (1600, 461) suggested that there was a lower limit at which:

the father of the family should not undertake this business, because here it is a question of profit, which can only come with a sufficient number of trees. For the particular nature of the work, it is necessary to work on it in great volume, otherwise the game would not be worth a candle, being like that women do who, for pleasure, nurture some of this stock.

For Serres, the investment by women in sericulture was a question of scale and emotion, restricted to a pleasant pastime rather than an endeavor oriented towards personal financial gain.

Works targeting women of means designated their involvement in sericulture in distinctive terms from their male counterparts, as motivated by pleasure rather than profit. Le Tellier's *Brief discours contenant la manière de nourrir les vers à soye* (1602) was dedicated to the Duchess of Rosny, Rachel de Cochefilet (1562–1659), second wife of Maximilien de Béthune, Duke of Sully (1560–1641). It was, notably, the first French text to include illustrations, which suggested that Le Tellier felt women might need a different kind of presentation of the technicalities of sericulture specifically to that conventionally provided for male readerships. The original recipient of these illustrations had also been a woman, Costanza Alamanni, the wife of Raffaele de' Medici (1477–55), in a text commissioned by her brother, the prominent Florentine statesman, Luigi Alamanni (1495–1556) (Vérot 2023, 28). Le Tellier acknowledged that the Duke of Sully had used his own lands to plan an experimental crop of mulberry trees. He asked the duchess to intercede with her husband, and to encourage him not to content himself solely with developing his own lands, but rather to use his influence in government to become "the author of a beautiful policy and order that aims to establish the art of silk universally across the realm" (1602, Aii^v). Yet Le Tellier envisioned the duchess as no mere conduit to her husband. He further imagined a gynocracy for his female dedicatee, claiming sericulture "as something that is convenient and belongs to women alone, without intervention by men being needed" (1602, Aii^r). Le Tellier framed sericulture as an independent activity for such wealthy women. Yet he, like Serres before him, described it as less an economic investment than a pastime for her leisure hours. He imagined that the duchess could "from time to time take pleasure in this fine exercise" that he termed a form of domestic labor (*ménage*), not the activity of an entrepreneur (1602, Aii^{r-v}). Women whose financial resources could have created meaningful investment were guided nonetheless to understand their contribution as for their personal pleasure rather than economic profit.

As they characterized the activities and motivations of women and men, these seventeenth-century advocates made entrepreneurialism an endeavor of men. Men as "entrepreneurs" might invest at different scales, but these authors argued that they did so for personal benefit, as well as, for some writers, for the national good. Women, where they had means to invest, were described

as doing so for pleasure. The work entrepreneur does not appear to have been attached to a woman. Moreover, where men were encouraged by these texts to engage in moriculture, sericulture and silk-work manufacture, women's investment was limited to elements attached to sericultural domestication, such as the nurture and handling of silkworms, rather than mulberry tree plantations and silk work manufacture. This characterization ignored the reality of sixteenth-century courtly women's involvement in wider activities described above, of which at least Laffemas was aware and which he brought to his readers' notice through his publication on Catherine de' Medici in 1602.

Laffemas' Catherine as Exemplar

In his publication, Laffemas memorialized and celebrated Catherine de' Medici as an early investor in moriculture, sericulture and silk work manufacture on lands over which she held influence. If he hoped that her kin, Henri's new queen, Marie de' Medici (1575–1642), might have inherited the dynastic gene for economic and agricultural patronage, he did not make this explicit. Catherine was not mentioned by name on the title of the work, where it was her status as a queen, "the late queen mother," not as a Medici that was foregrounded. Catherine was only mentioned, simply as Catherine, as the author of the letter that Laffemas included in his work. Yet the presence of a new Medici queen surely encouraged Laffemas to consider her ancestor ripe for rehabilitation from the calumnies of a previous generation, and Laffemas could produce documentary evidence of Catherine's activities to further his cause. As this section explores, Laffemas framed Catherine as much more than simply a patron who gave funds to others with ideas for new projects. As the title of his publication indicated, Laffemas made Catherine's personal commitment central as "she set industry to work and provided for the workers with her own means". In so doing, Laffemas had to navigate the terms in which a queen could be an "example" to entrepreneurs, and even a king, all without ever using the term entrepreneur for her.

Laffemas was unusual among his contemporaries because he presented women as well as men as having experience and expertise to share with his readership. Although overwhelmingly the work of these authors made clear that sericultural knowledge was held and communicated by "expert men in the art", Laffemas buttressed his descriptions of Catherine's activities with examples of other women involved in successful botanical experimentation. He recounted a visit to the home of secretary of state, Louis Potier de Gesvres (d. 1630), in Seau near Bourg-la-Royne, just out of Paris. Here, René Fortier, the son of his gardener, had researched the making of silk at the royal château of Madrid and returned to plant some 40 trees, producing a high-quality silk that he had sold for 30 *écus*. But Laffemas (1602, 12) did not just take Fortier's word for it:

I wanted to know of his mother, the gardener [female: *la iardinière*], if her son was not hindering her because of the food for his worms. She responded that [...] there was more trouble and effort to raise a cow than all these worms and that she was cross that he had not had this idea a long time ago, and that each mulberry tree was at present worth more than an *écu*.

In this example, authority as to the economic and horticultural implications of sericulture were provided in Laffemas's text by an experienced woman. Similarly, in another publication two years later, Laffemas (1604, 22) cited an Italian woman "Dame Julle" who worked in the king's gardens of the Tuileries palace, as "the most intelligent woman that one could find", among the "experts" who detailed for him the specifics of silkworm management. In another, he cited the successful

work of a couple from Languedoc, Jacques Chabot and Marie de Greneuze, although not by name, who had been making silk in “Madame’s building” in Paris, from the mulberry trees in her garden from the past four to five years, as an example to those who did not believe silk could be made in France (1603, 129; Vérot 2023: 84–85). Laffemas emphasized that expertise could be found in women as well as men, setting the scene for raising awareness of Catherine’s activities. While he appears not to have used the term “entrepreneur” for women, he showed that it was not simply as a queen that women could become involved in the new industry, and may have aspired to attract more women like Catherine to his cause.

However, as a queen, the example of Catherine de’ Medici held particular utility for Laffemas. Advocating the importance of national self-sufficiency, he found in the now-deceased queen an example of a personal commitment, an investment of self and funds, as well as a nascent form of vertical integration, in a silk industry on her lands. His short publication offered two different examples of Catherine’s work in this respect. The first of these was at her château of Moulins in the Bourbonnais, where at the time of Henri II’s legislation she had “had planted a great number in the park of the château of Moulins” (Laffemas 1602, 5). Thereafter she had ordered:

that the manufacture of all kinds of tapestries made in the style of Flanders be made at Moulins, and that the silk from these mulberry trees be for the said tapestries, even that the various kinds of wools required be sourced there, which would render these tapestries good value, especially as the Bourbonnais is in the middle of the kingdom (Laffemas 1602, 5).

This suggested a model of vertical integration where Catherine sought to bring under her control and coordination all stages from access to raw materials to finished product. Unfortunately, little evidence matching Laffemas’ depiction of Catherine’s activities on these lands remains in contemporary records. Geographer Nicolas de Nicolay (1517–83) had been commissioned by Catherine to produce a survey of the realm’s province and in 1569 he completed a manuscript *General Description of the County and Duchy of the Bourbonnais*. This included a brief account of the château, including its:

large, beautiful and spacious gardens, well maintained and cultivated, which are largely populated with orange trees, lemon trees, myrtles, laurels, pines, common and green oaks and all other species of trees bearing a diversity of excellent fruit and the flowerbeds are no less furnished according to the seasons with all kinds of melons, cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, chard, artichokes and tomatoes, vegetable herbs and various flowers (Maurice d’Irisson d’Hérisson 1875, 21).

While this did not reference mulberry trees (which may have been planted in the park, rather than the gardens that Nicolay describes), Nicolay’s description provides a sense of the novelty and innovation that guided the château’s broader horticultural program during the period of Catherine’s possession.

It was Catherine’s activities in Orléans that provided Laffemas with more detailed content. Across seventeen short sections, Laffemas gave examples of the activities of Catherine and other contemporary women and men, one of which presented “the tenor of a letter” from the queen, although the text was printed in italics that signaled its status as a cited text (1602, 15). The original has not been located. The letter, which readers were told was sent to the mayor and aldermen of

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Orléans, part of her dower holdings, reports the queen's desire to see "the manufacture of silk work well established, and also tapestry workers", combining the two forms of manufacture just as Laffemas claimed she had done at Moulins (1602, 17). However, the manufacture of silk work in Orléans that the letter describes suggests an attempt to develop another part of the manufacturing value chain to those described at Moulins or Chenonceau, by establishing a viable economic and cultural urban ecosystem into which workers could be inserted. The letter depicts the queen calling upon the council to assist her vision of "finding the means to attract to this town a quantity of masters of these trades, either from Flanders, or elsewhere, besides those that may be there at present, begin to establish this manufacture" (Laffemas 1602, 17). There had certainly been tapestry workers in Orléans before this period, for a cohort operating in the town were documented in investigations undertaken under Philibert Emmanuel in the Spanish Netherlands in 1557. In those records, Pierre Hercelin declared that he had managed the only manufacture of tapestries in the town, with nine or ten workers, who were both Flemish and French (Jules Guiffrey 1886, 238). Laffemas' presentation of Catherine's objective involved a scaling up of production as a significant investment in the town.

The letter indicates that Catherine was prepared to put her own money into the enterprise: "I so long to see in my time, and by my means, this town gain and enhanced with a great deal of good and great commodities" (Laffemas 1602, 16). It articulates her commitment of start-up financial support, in an endeavor whose outcome was as yet uncertain: "Being for my part resolved during the first four years that the masters come to the town, to make them a gift from my finances, to give them more means and reasons to remain and become used to it" (Laffemas 1602, 18). In all senses, the missive showcases Catherine's explicit agency in developing this enterprise in the town and understanding the need for her personal investment to enable it.

Moreover, the letter gives attention to various details large and small needed to consider in order to structure the industry. It depicts the queen asking the council to advise her by providing her with a plan for the workers, specifically:

accommodating them with barns and attics, for the tapestry workers as well as the spinners and silk-workers, as well I know that you have the means in this town, which will be greatly enhanced, decorated and enriched in this way, by having all that is required and necessary for this purpose, such as dedicated water for the dyeing and quantities of wools (Laffemas 1602, 19).

The letter describes the queen mother paving a route to success for Orléans by using all the tools at her disposal. Thus, she had, the letter records, also petitioned the king, Henri III, "to exempt them from all charges and subsidies in consideration of the good and commodity that the manufacture would bring to the town" (Laffemas 1602, 18).

Further, the letter positions the queen as a committed and responsive investor, who expected the council to report on their actions to her and "to assist and serve me in this, my intention". Specifically, it shows Catherine asking her readers:

to support and advise how to make good and gracious treatment of the masters of these trades, who would like to come to this town to introduce this production, that gives them reason to come more willingly, to habituate themselves there (Laffemas 1602, 17–18).

The letter offers an exemplary model as to how a committed, and powerful, investor could demand the contribution and support of others to her plan: “if you ever had desire to do me an agreeable service, let me know of it in the accomplishment of what is above and within a few days of the order you have given to this” (Laffemas 1602, 19). The letter thus presents the queen’s personal commitment and determination to attempt the development of an explicit aspect of the endeavor.

Catherine’s silk enterprise in Orléans did not become a long-term success and Laffemas made no secret of the fact. Yet the causes of the failure were not attributable to the queen. Had a new round of the civil and religious unrest not engulfed Orléans in 1585, he mused, the new workforce might have become well established. He noted (1602, 20) that foreigners, or those who sold their imported silk cloth, had spoiled the product of the local silk by throwing a pot of resin into the dyeing vats, “so that finally the poor workers were all constrained to leave it all”. For Laffemas, these challenges that had bedeviled Catherine’s investment were perhaps implicitly to be interpreted as the reason why a careful, detailed and national-level scale of investment would be required under Henri IV. That action would be, his work (1602, 20) suggested, “for the general good of the whole realm”. In France, where a queen was never the ruler in her own right, Catherine’s activities could provide an example to men as entrepreneurs but, importantly, Laffemas implied, it required a king to support and regulate this new industry in his kingdom.

In what terms did Laffemas suggest she invested her personal resources to develop these business opportunities? Seventeenth-century advocates brought profit, pleasure and public good to the fore in print publications but these were not new concepts. We can in fact locate them in records that surround Catherine de’ Medici’s activities. She required a vast source of income to develop Chenonceau with varied projects including installing sericulture and silk-workers, and in 1576, secured revenues from her barony of Levroux in Berry. The *lettres patentes* ordering that the funds be placed in the hands of her estate manager at Chenonceau, Jacques Adam, are instructive. They commence with a preamble that counter-balances motivations of pleasure and profit in the queen’s vision:

[...] to take and receive more pleasure from our château, lands, house & lordship of Chenonceau, to adapt & beautify it, together with its woods & gardens, & increase the management that we are accustomed to doing there, so that we can have and find everything that is required for convenience and honest pleasure that one can wish for and perceive through well-kept and orderly management, [...] to derive more profit and convenience than has been custom. (Casimir Chevalier 1879, 222)

The rhetorical justification for Catherine’s expenditure includes both dual pleasurable and profitable motivations to her endeavor. Beauty was frequently constructed by the queen, her managers and those who sought her support, as a political act, indeed a responsibility she held as one of France’s leaders, that demonstrated her care of her people and stimulated beneficial emotions as aspects of orderly management (Broomhall 2021, 282–3). Here, these same ambitions were written into a context that was not to benefit the wider public, at least directly, but where the experience of pleasure was more personal. Yet it positioned a program of beautification and revenue-raising at Catherine’s Chenonceau estate as objectives that held moral and political purpose.

The letter that Laffemas cited likewise frames Catherine’s vision through the rhetoric of public good, describing the establishment of silk-working as adding the luster to Orléans, enabling “growth and enrichment” of the town. Among these benefits would be, it (1602, 18–19) claims in

the queen mother's name, "a large number of poor people who will learn by this means to gain their living to the benefit, growth and enhancement of the town". However, another was to stimulate positive emotions for the queen, and implicitly for the people of Orléans, via the town's embellishment: "You know from the past the particular care that I have always had to procure all that I could for decoration, growth and enrichment of my town of Orléans, since it pleased the Kings my sons to leave its possession and enjoyment to me" (Laffemas 1602, 16). Catherine's investment, as the letter characterizes it, was thus both emotional and financial, as too were the outcomes of this endeavor. These arguments situated the queen's attempts to make profit as bringing benefits, financial, social and emotional, to a wider public and as the responsibility of good and orderly management expected from the kingdom's rulers.

The rationale for a queen's investment in sericulture in these texts about Catherine shows similarities and distinctions from that suggested for other women proposed in advocates' publications. Collectively, these sources told readers that all women held pleasure as a central feature of their sericultural engagement as investors, to the point that the most important form of profit for women funding elements of the silk industry could be characterized as emotional rather than financial. If Catherine's activities, however, were oriented for economic gain, that gain could not be for her alone. The business endeavors of queens never outwardly proposed they delivered returns only for queens. Queens' revenue-raising activities were frequently cast as serving the public good even when in lands provided for their own maintenance, especially in widowhood (Broomhall and Davidson 2025). Public good then, not raised as an element for women's investment generally, was central for queens such as Catherine. Evidence related to her business activities and other projects often added an additional kind of public good beyond financial profit, as part of how they served a wider public, that of positive emotional effect (Broomhall 2025; 2026). In so doing, the pleasure motivation for all women's investment was extended for a queen to positive feeling as public good.

Conclusion

In the flurry of publications about the business opportunities represented by sericulture at the turn of the seventeenth century, Laffemas chose to center Catherine de' Medici's silk activities as a model for the age and certainly a prompt for a king's greater oversight. It was a nuanced undertaking. A queen's integrated actions on lands she held could be a guide to other sericultural investors, including a king, all of whom had varying degrees of moral responsibility to contribute funds to uncertain investments, for the future good of the people. Yet a king's duties, in Laffemas' eyes, also extended to more extensive national support and regulation than that of a queen. Indeed, Catherine's example, and failure, highlighted reasons why such royal intervention was required.

The vision Laffemas presented to readers positioned Catherine as no silent partner, but rather an invested investor, eager to recognize and support potential profit-making opportunities, and to assert her vision with administrative officials who could see it to fruition. Yet, to do so, Laffemas negotiated how to represent an early modern queen as an example when the idea of both an entrepreneur and of a queen embedded gender assumptions about pleasure, profit and public good motivations for business investment that rendered the association challenging for contemporaries to imagine. He could do little better than use Catherine's own documents, for she and her administrators, like other queens, had had to negotiate the very same challenge in her own representation. Their rhetorical expertise, converting pleasure and/as profit into public good, made the citation of Catherine's letter in full a logical addition to Laffemas' own claims for her. Thus, Laffemas could offer his Catherine as a model, an active agent whose business ventures might

have yielded little success in her time but which, through their bold spirit and even in their failures, provided a rationale for more robust royal and individual entrepreneurialism.

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