AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Leah Redmond Chang, who among her other professional accomplishments is the author of the new book, *Young Queens: Three Renaissance Women and the Price of Power*. So first can we start by introducing the three women in question?

LRC: There are three queens: Catherine de Medici, who's the Queen Mother of France, her daughter Elisabeth de Valois, who is the Queen Consort of Spain, and Catherine's daughter-in-law, Mary Queen of Scots, who's both the ruling queen of Scotland, and also the Queen Consort of France for a short 18 months.

AT: And when her husband tragically dies young, Mary returns to Scotland, but it really wasn't her home in the sense that she'd largely been raised in the French court by Catherine.

LRC: Yeah, so first I should say one of the reasons why I put these three women together is that they are family. They all know each other and they all live together at the court of France for a while. But as you say, that's in part because Mary Queen of Scots comes to France as a little five-year-old child. Yeah, she's very, very small. I think that sometimes people forget that. She comes to France because she's the reigning queen of Scotland from the time she's nine days old. Her father, James V, dies just at the time that the British are really threatening to overrun Scotland. And these wars between the Scottish and the British go on for all of Mary's young childhood. England always had had its eyes on the Kingdom of Scotland. The wars begin under Henry VIII, who is quite well-known, quite famous, and they continue under Henry VIII's son Edward VI. And at some point, when the actual warring isn't really working to conquer Scotland, a plan is devised by both Henry VIII and Edward VI to try to coerce the Scottish to hand over the young Mary Queen of Scots as a bride for the young Edward VI. So what the English hope to do is through marriage acquire the kingdom of Scotland.
So at the time, Mary Queen of Scots, she's really just a little kid and the reigning of the kingdom is in the hands of her mother, Mary of Guise. And Mary of Guise has no plans to hand Scotland over to the English for a host of reasons, including the fact that the English are Protestant. They've already broken with the Catholic Church and Mary of Guise is a very devout Catholic and her alliances are naturally towards France. There had been a long standing alliance between Scotland and France and she has every interest in preserving it. So she cuts a deal with King Henry II of France to send Mary over to France for safekeeping, almost as a little political refugee. Her mother knows that she'll be safe in France. And part of that deal is that eventually Mary would marry the heir to the French throne, the Dauphin Francis. So that is the deal for Mary Queen of Scots, who arrives probably knowing nothing of this when she's five years old and is introduced into the French royal nursery, where she meets the young Elisabeth de Valois, French royal princess and daughter of Catherine de Medici, who is three years younger than her. So that's how that relationship gets formed. And that's also the first time that Catherine de Medici meets Mary Queen of Scots when Mary is a very small child.

AT: It's interesting that you bring up Mary of Guise, who was yet another queen of the time period. And she was ruling Scotland at the time. And in that context, she was ruling as regent

because her daughter was both too young and out of the country. But you talk about the three different kinds of queens who are represented by our three main characters.

LRC: So the three different kinds of queens are a reigning queen, like Mary Queen of Scots, right, who has inherited the throne and reigns as sovereign over the kingdom. You have a queen consort, who is the wife of the king, who doesn't necessarily rule in the same way, although I'll come to revisit that. And then you have a queen mother who is queen mother by virtue of the fact that she was married to a ruling king and is the mother of the future sovereign.
So a ruling queen, a sovereign queen in theory, rules the same way a sovereign king would on the throne, right, vested with the same types of power - in theory. Queen mothers and queen consorts rule a little bit differently. They rule behind the throne. Usually, it's for a very short time. Queen consorts were often regents for their absent husbands. So for instance, if a husband was off in war, he would hand over power officially to his wife for the duration of his absence. And he hoped to come back alive. And normally, that that handing over power was actually quite supported. So in some ways, the queen, when she would serve as regent, she technically held the reins. But usually, there were a lot of counselors behind the scenes who were actually doing the business of the kingdom in her stead. But it was seen as appropriate for the husband to hand it over to the queen because she represents the monarchy.
A queen mother could do the same thing, especially when the child was young. And this is the case of Mary of Guise. But what's really interesting about Mary of Guise is that she was ruling Scotland in her daughter's name for quite a while, even though she was not the official regent. There was actually another noble Scotsman who was the official regent, but he wasn't very good at ruling. So everyone kind of turned to Mary of Guise as the real power behind the throne. And this is often the case with women. It's not always very visible that women are often playing these kind of hidden powerful roles behind the scenes.
But when Mary is about eight years old, nine years old, Mary of Guise actually comes to France to lobby Henry II of France to help her become the official regent of Scotland. And she does eventually become the official regent of Scotland. But she had to lobby for it to actually get that title. So Mary of Guise does rule Scotland for quite a while in her daughter's stead until she dies. And then it's handed over to Mary, who at the time is married to Francis II of France.
So in that situation, Mary is technically the sovereign queen of Scotland, but everyone kind of knows that her husband is sort of doing the ruling for her.

AT: In your book, you talk about the precariousness of a woman's rule. And as we're talking about, well, it was okay to be a regent because, well, that's a short term thing. It's almost like a caretaking role. Like it's, you know, you're just going to take care of the country, but then the man's going to come home and it's going to be fine. But I think you've mentioned that regardless of the type of queen, they have this same precarity in terms of people not really having faith. Like it makes them uneasy. So would you mind getting into sort of the different factors that are at play on, you know, not just a country's level, but internationally?

LRC: I think maybe we can start with France. It's a good one to start with because there are no ruling queens of France. France took care of that in the Middle Ages. They made sure that there

could be no ruling queens of France through what is called Salik law. Now, it's a bit of a misnomer because it sounds like law, right? Salic law. But in fact, it's just a custom. There is no real law behind it, but it has the force of law. And the reason why it's adopted in theory is to keep foreign men off the throne of France. So the thinking was that if a woman were to inherit the throne of France, she would get married to a foreign prince or a foreign king. And that would mean that a foreign man would probably, on some level, wrest control of the French throne. But even more importantly, they would have a child, a boy who would inherit the throne of France. But the boy's interests might be as much in that foreign country, where he would also inherit, as it was in France. So Salic law on some level was designed to keep sort of foreign interests out of the French monarchy.

AT: That whole premise is founded on the assumption that when a woman gets married, she's going to hand over her power.

LRC: Yes. And it's really an assumption. It's really a kind of circular assumption that women are naturally weak, that in the hierarchy of a marriage, the woman must be obedient to the man. It's there in religion. And because monarchy at the time is so tied in with the Catholic church, those two things are almost inseparable. The other thing that's really important, particularly in France, is that the king is seen to be almost a sacred being. He kind of occupies an almost priestly role. And just like only men can be priests in the Catholic church, it was seen that only a man can exercise that kind of quasi divine power that the king holds. So it didn't make any sort of logical sense to them that a woman could exercise the same sort of power. But what's really interesting to me about Salic law is that even though, again, in theory, it's almost about national interests, I almost think that's a sneaky way of keeping women off the throne. So there's a sort of tying of xenophobia in with sexism or with misogyny. Those two things get like interlaced together to a point where they're almost inseparable.

AT: I think there's also this assumption that everyone else shares your views, which even today, obviously, plenty of people fall into that trap of assuming everyone agrees with me. Life would be a lot easier if they did. But part of this uneasiness was the idea that, you know, we see women as weak. Therefore, if anyone else sees that we are ruled by a woman, they will see us as weak. And that makes us vulnerable to invasion, to being taken advantage of in trade, to really any sort of being taken advantage of.

LRC: Absolutely. And so it becomes an almost circular thing, right? Like they cannot even afford to have a woman on the throne because it will lead, exactly, to this vulnerability that will invite wars or invite disputes about the throne. That was the other fear, not only that foreigners might invade, but that other pretenders to the throne within the kingdom might see as this opportunity to stage a coup. The interesting thing about the anxieties around women ruling, or children ruling, is that it kind of reveals an inherent weakness in monarchy, right? Like everything is sort of contingent around this one person, this one person ruling effectively. And there're always these sort of potential sources of trouble, whether it's from like, a war, an international war, or ambition from other sort of nobles or competing families within a kingdom. So that there's

something actually quite fragile about dynasties. And when you put a woman on the throne, it just kind of reveals all that fragility. Or when you put a child on the throne, it reveals all that fragility. So what happens when a woman inherits - not in France, but anywhere else - or a child, is a lot of shoring up, to kind of make sure that everything is as stable as possible. And one way you could shore it up in other countries, where a woman could inherit the throne, is to make sure she gets married to a really powerful man. Because that is probably going to keep other violent pretenders for making a bid for the throne. Do you see this happen in England, for instance? So other countries, you can have a woman. We can talk about that. We can talk about in Scotland. You know, a woman can inherit in England. A woman can become the reigning queen of England. But no one really likes it. Again, for all the reasons that I've outlined, it makes people incredibly nervous. And so, what you see in England, for instance, under the reigns of Mary Tudor, or Elizabeth Tudor, is this kind of anxiety by the council to get this queen married as quickly as we possibly can. Because it's a stabilizing force. It puts the kingdom at ease.

AT: Yeah, it's funny that you mentioned that because Mary Tudor's marriage, I mean, that almost seems like an argument for Salic law, because she marries this Spanish guy. Like, she's literally known as Bloody Mary because she then started just executing Protestants in this awful, you know, religious backlash. But I mean, when you were talking about Salic law, that was actually the example I was thinking of, of having a foreign prince coming in, being a bad influence, negatively impacting the population. And then, you know, she didn't even produce an heir out of that.

LRC: Well, right. So, okay, so in some ways, women cannot win, right? So you do see that. So one of the things, I mean, now we're going to talk about queens who, you know, make cameo appearances in Young Queens. But I love talking about them because, you know, they offer another example. And what I would hope is that someone could read Young Queens and then go read about another queen and see some parallels and also some differences, see the questions that are at stake. And, you know, I actually have a lot of sympathy for Mary Tudor because, you know, she couldn't win. And actually, when she inherited the throne, she thought about not getting married for a little while. You know, she wasn't quite sure whether that was going to work in her favor. And when she did marry Philip II, I think she did quite a lot of work to try to limit his powers, you know, legally. She knew there was a lot of anxiety about, you know, around the Spanish and, of course, there were rebellions, there were whole rebellions around the fact that she was marrying Philip II. But at the same time, Philip II did have his fans in England. People were anxious for there to be an heir. You know, when Mary Tudor thought that she was pregnant, people were rejoicing, you know, because they were going to have an heir, there was going to have a continuation of the dynasty. And with Elizabeth Tudor too, you know, there was a lot of debate when she was a young queen about who she should marry, not if she should marry, but who she should marry, you know, to kind of get around these problems that had come in with the reign of Mary Tudor. And, you know, with Mary Queen of Scots, who does, you know, play a major role in Young Queens, that is also, you know, a question, who she should marry that would be to the best political advantage of Scotland. And Mary, of course, has her own ideas because, you know, she has the goal of she wants to be the heir to England. So

she wants to marry someone, who will help her do that. But, you know, it's always a tricky subject. And, you know, as I said, I think that to some degree, these women who are sovereign queens, they can't really win, because it's sort of damned if you do, damned if you don't. And whoever they choose as their husband, there's not going to be like unanimous approval. There's always going to be someone who objects for, you know, for certain reasons.

AT: And it's also interesting when we're getting into the catch 22, damned if you do, damned if you don't, producing an heir was at once, it was necessary for them. That is your primary duty, is producing an heir to carry on the line. But then once you have produced an heir, especially a male heir, Mary Queen of Scots had this as well, where, you know, once she had produced a male heir suddenly, there were these factions thinking, well, if we can get rid of Mary, here's a child that we can use for our own power. And it's a boy. So even though, you know, he's a toddler, at least he's male. It's this weird thing where you would think that producing an heir, especially a male, should make her position more stable. But it also is putting her at risk. So she can't win.

LRC: No, she can't win. And that, I think, is the great tragedy of Mary Queen of Scots, because, you know, if you compare her to the two other queens, in my book, Catherine de Medici and Elisabeth de Valois, in some ways, you could say that in terms of the queen's first duty of, you know, bearing the heir to the throne, she was the most successful. She actually has the boy who would be king. You know, Catherine does, but it takes her a while to get there and then her sons struggle, right? And Elisabeth de Valois actually never is able to do that. So even though in many other ways, she was quite successful, Elisabeth, as a consort, she does not really fulfill that queen's first duty. So Mary does, but, you know, the political circumstances of the time are such that, as you say, her son, James, can be used as a pawn, can be used as a tool against her, which is exactly what happens. So the irony, or I called it the queen's paradox, you know, the paradox there is that she does it. But it's, it's actually in doing the thing that should, in theory, give her the most power, sort of consolidate her hold on the throne, which actually enables her enemies to overthrow her.
You do wonder sometimes if Mary had made different choices, if things would have gone differently for her, but I'm not so sure, you know, it's one of those things where there's no one choice or one, no one particular, you know, political trigger that makes things happen. It's like a number of different forces at work.

AT: Now, Catherine de Medici, who was also the star of your previous book, Queen Mother, had a particularly interesting rags to riches stories, which you, you open the book with. So do you want to tell us a bit about that and why it's so intriguing? Like it definitely captures your attention right off the bat.

LRC: Yeah, so, you know, it's funny that you call it rags to riches because Catherine was never poor. But, you know, rags to riches is always a little bit culturally contingent. So it depends when you were born and where you were born. So, you know, Catherine's story is interesting because on her father's side, she's a Medici. And though the Medici are very powerful and extremely

wealthy, I mean, in some ways they're kingmakers, right, because they fund a lot of monarchies and they send a lot of their own Medici sons who are sitting on the papal throne, you know. So they wield a lot of power, but they're not noble. They're not aristocrats. And this definitely, you know, kind of demotes them in the eyes of aristocratic Europe. So that's who Catherine is on her father's side. But on her mother's side, she is a very noble French princess. Her parents are married in a political deal between the king of France, Francis I, and a Medici pope, Leo X, because Francis is very interested in acquiring lands in Italy. This is part of what's called the Italian wars. It's also called the Valois Habsburg Wars. And they dominate the end of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century. It's this longstanding, you know, generations long war between the French and actually the Spanish, the Spanish Habsburgs for domination of Italy. So, you know, when Francis wasn't winning Italy over in wars, he decides to do it through marriage, right? It's the same story all over again. And so he promises a French noblewoman, who's quite close to the throne of France, Madeleine de La Tour d'Auvergne, to the scion of the Medici, Lorenzo II. And the marriage doesn't last very long. They do have one daughter and then both parents die within weeks of Catherine's birth. So Catherine is an orphan almost from the very beginning. And we actually don't know a lot about her childhood. Because she was, well, she was young, she was a girl. No one could be sure that a child was going to live, certainly before the age of about five, six or seven. So, you know, people don't really start paying attention to children until they're much older. And, you know, it just wasn't clear what her political role, if any, was going to be. So we don't know too much about her early childhood. But when she's eight years old, Catherine, you know, becomes a political pawn in wars for the control of Florence. These are, you know, sort of political battles between the Medici and their enemies for control of Florence. And Catherine is made a political prisoner by the Florentine Republican council. And she, for three years, lives in a convent where she's very comfortable, but where it's very clear that she's a political prisoner. And at some point, she thinks she actually might be killed. And I think it's the young Catherine that really made me sympathize with Catherine as a person. There's a way in which we have vilified Catherine to Medici. It's very easy to do that. She's been vilified for so long that that is sort of the dominant representation of Catherine in our culture. But the little tiny Catherine that I met at the age of eight, she’s just this young child. And she's an orphan. And she doesn't really know what her support structure is. She doesn't have any parents, her one aunt, who was a mother figure, died. She has an uncle through marriage who she's close with, and who's also very connected to the French royal court. So the French are on her side, but these are not people she sees every day. I mean, I think of the child Catherine, what her life must have been like, who took care of her, you know, what, what she wanted. You know, did she, did she want more caretaking? Did she want more family? Did she want a place to belong? Because in so many ways, she seemed not to have a place to belong, even in Florence. And, you know, I feel like so much of what we do in life is, you know, the seeds of it are first planted in childhood. And what you see of Catherine later is a woman who struggles to have children and then has, you know, 10 children and is a loving and doting and kind of controlling mother also. And you wonder how much of that has to do with her experience as a child, where she was an orphan and a little bit marginalized. And her wanting to build a family that's, you know, very connected and very loyal to each other and has a very, very strong infrastructure. Perhaps that has something to do with the fact that she didn't have any of

that when she was a child.

AT: And it's interesting, well, first off, the phrase “helicopter mom before helicopters existed” is what's running through my head.

LRC: Yes.

AT: Because when you see television shows like the Serpent Queen and Reign that feature Catherine and Mary, you know, during that period when Mary was a teenager, it really shows the relationship as adversarial. And you describe the relationship, like the relationship of all three women, as “bound to each other through blood and marriage, through alliance, friendship, and filial piety.” So I'm just sort of, I'm always intrigued by how we represent historical women. And I'm curious, why do you think there's that, that difference between the, you know, loving, caring mother figure. Controlling - sure, lots of moms are. But, you know, not nearly as nefarious as we tend to see in media. So I'd love to dig into where that juxtaposition is happening.

LRC: Yeah. Okay, so the first thing, just to answer the specific question about Catherine and Mary. So their relationship does get adversarial. But much further down the line, I think, than is normally thought, you know, when the very tiny child, Mary, age five, comes to France, the way Catherine writes about her is tender, and loving, and admiring. I mean, she really just seems smitten with Mary, the way that everybody else was. And Catherine was quite close to Mary's mother, Mary of Guise. So Catherine had every reason to want to feel affectionate towards the child, Mary, Queen of Scots. And, you know, there were, Mary had had childhood illnesses that were actually quite dangerous at times. And there's this one letter by Mary's uncle who writes to Mary of Guise and, and describes how Catherine de Medici was up all night with Mary at her bedside, tending to her, getting her through this illness. So, you know, whether that Catherine did that from a sense of, you know, affection, or a sense of duty, she was there. She was there for Mary when Mary was a child.
Things start to go bad when the politics start to go bad, right? You know, when Mary's French family starts to become a threat to Catherine later on when Catherine is the regent, then she starts to distrust Mary. And that's partially because Mary is, you know, very devoted to her French family. Her alliances to that are very strong, but also because Mary is a girl and Catherine knows that Mary's French family, the Guises, are going to use her as a pawn. That's just what happens. Girls get used as pawns. So, you know, Mary represents a kind of adversary whether or not Mary wanted to be the adversary.
And then, and then later it does get more fraught. And that's, that's when, you know, sort of politics gets in the way of any kind of natural affection, you know, or filial piety that was fostered when Mary was much younger. But it's true, that hasn't really been explored in media. Maybe it's less interesting, right, to kind of see a sort of loving relationship. You know, maybe it's more fun to see the equivalent of a cat fight, right? I mean, there's a reason why that term exists, you know, in our culture. It draws a lot of eyes. And, you know, I think the other juxtaposition there that's happening is this kind of long-standing representation of Catherine as this evil Machiavellian queen. And then the young and beautiful Mary Queen of Scots who in so many

ways seems to embody victimhood. So, we have these two kind of cliches of womanhood that are being juxtaposed. And those cliches are so entrenched in our society. I mean, they go back thousands of years. They are so entrenched that they're almost tropes, right? So I often think that like misogyny, one of the reasons why misogyny or misogynist language works is that it's so familiar to people. The same way that any kind of “anti-” language works, you know, like anti-immigration or, you know, there's these stances and these vocabularies that when people hear it, they think, oh, yeah, that sounds familiar because they've heard it somewhere before. So it has a kind of long-standing cultural memory to it. And I think the same thing is true with these tropes, like the evil queen, whether it's Catherine or the evil queen in Snow White, the young innocent beautiful victim, whether it's Mary, Queen of Scots or Snow White, you know, has this place in our culture. It seems very familiar. It taps into that storytelling mode in our brain. And so we go with it because it's almost like written into the very idea of story.

AT: And it's interesting that you bring up Snow White because there's this recurring theme as well of the mother who's not a mother. And I don't mean to say that, you know, stepmothers, mothers in law can't be mothers, but it is that context of you are a mother figure without technically being the person's biological mother. And we see that over and over again in fairy tales as well. And the whole trope of daughter-in-law / mother-in-law strife is so common.

LRC: It is so common. And at the same time, you know, let me just say that Catherine, you know, she was a lot to bear. I do. I do think that, she's, she's sort of overbearing. You see that even with Elisabeth of Valois, you see that with her son-in-law Philip II. But you know, more power to her in some ways. You know, often Catherine got what she wanted because she just kept going, you know. But so you see that as a trope. But at the same time, so one of the challenges when you're writing, you know, the history of women is not wanting to fall into these tropes, but at the same time, not wanting to make everyone into saints, either, right? Like you don't want to necessarily paint too pretty a picture if that's not what you're seeing in the primary text. It was really important to me to try to create a complex portrait of all of these queens, because that is what I was seeing. And, you know, there's sort of ups and downs, like in every relationship. There are times where things are really good between Elisabeth and Catherine, and times where it gets a little bit more fraught. And the same thing is true of Mary Queen of Scots. You know, it does get more fraught with Catherine and Mary.
But when Mary is in real trouble, Catherine does try to help her. You know, does she do everything she can? Probably not, because there were other political circumstances that she had to weigh. But that is also the reality of politics. And it's not just Catherine. It's everybody. It's all the women in this book. And all the men is that there are always these other circumstances that maybe stay their hand a little bit, or that are always weighing in in the choices they make. So what's really interesting is that, you know, Catherine has been blamed for so much, where other figures might be exonerated, both men or women. But the nature of being political is having to make certain choices, right? So just to come back to the point, you know, Catherine does try to help Mary. And more importantly, Mary does often ask Catherine for help. So even if she doesn't always get it, you know, Mary is still banking on kind of a long previous relationship of both affection and sort of family kinship that she thinks has some currency that she can use,

you know, when she does need political assistance.

AT: Well, I wonder, I mean, obviously I haven't read nearly as many primary sources as you have. But I also wonder if there's just sort of that sense of, you know, no shade to Mary of Guise, but Catherine was her primary mother figure. And I wonder how much of that is, you know, when a young adult is in trouble, that's who you go to for help. And you know, I'm sure there was, you know, political machinations and, you know, the strategy there. But I also wonder, you know, how much of that is just, you know, someone who calls herself Catherine's daughter, saying, "I want help."

LRC: Yes. And who else do I turn to, right? I mean, the other person, so Mary of Guise dies when Mary is just 18 years old, actually, just a few months before Mary's husband, Francis dies. It was a hard year for Mary. She was 18. And it's true, you know, she was raised without her mother. She has this very rich correspondence with her mother, you know, and she always, she's a very obedient daughter. But her mother wasn't there, you know, and the people who are there are, like you say, Catherine, and also her Guise relatives. So, you know, her Guise aunt and especially her grandmother, who is a really important figure in her mother's life. But her grandmother, you know, only has so much power, whereas Catherine does. And, you know, one of the points I make in the book and that kind of stayed with me for a while and troubled me was the fact that when Mary went back to Scotland, she was 18 years old, she sort of sent back there to hold the reins, but she's not really prepared to do it at all. And I always kind of wonder, if Catherine had felt more favorably towards her at the time, if things might have gone a little bit better for Mary, because Catherine was really a person who could have, who could have guided her a little bit in how to do this. But already their relationship had really frayed because by that time, Catherine is the regent. The Guises in France are really resisting her regency and doing a lot to trouble her regency. And so she doesn't feel good about any of the Guises at the moment. She's not disposed to help to help Mary, in part because Mary has always shown herself to be completely loyal to the Guises. But that's too bad, right? Because once again, you have this situation where the systems in place at the time, the very nature of politics in the time of dynasty is such that it's pitting women against women, where in maybe a different situation, they could have forged more of an alliance or at least a kind of supportive relationship.

AT: When we're talking about queens as rivals in different ways, because you see this with Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth Tudor, you arguably see it between Elizabeth and her own sister Mary. And even Catherine herself had a lot of media likes to play on tensions between her and her husband's mistress, Diane de Poitier, who had a lot of power, wasn't a queen, but she definitely was a powerful woman. And I always find it interesting because obviously, there are plenty of real tensions and real rivalries. But I wonder how much of that is stoked by men who don't like women in power, not wanting powerful women to realize how powerful they are together. And so stoking that idea of there can only be one of you at a time and any other woman is inherently a rival rather than a potential collaborator.

LRC: I think so. And, you know, one of the challenges again with writing about women from the

distant past is that you have so many centuries in between filled with men who are writing these histories, who, you know, are perhaps a little bit too prone to see the cat fight, as you say, because they don't love this idea that women are powerful in, you know, any shape or form. So, you know, that relationship between Diane de Poitier and Catherine, it is a really interesting relationship. And, you know, for sure, Catherine didn't love that Diane was right there because Diane kind of keeps Henry II, Catherine's husband from being 100% devoted to Catherine, though he is quite respectful in many ways of Catherine. But I also have, you know, often wondered whether that that relationship and even the sort of triangle of Henry, Diane, and Catherine was a much more sort of collaborative, as you say, relationship than we normally give it credit for. And certainly in the raising of the royal children, which was very important to Catherine, she got a lot of interference by Diane de Poitier, but also a lot of help from Diane de Poitier. And there were a lot of royal children who were all this nursery. And Henry and Catherine, you know, were really anxious to keep them alive. And so, you know, having Diane there to, you know, not physically help, but Diane was very powerful and could make sure that all the right people were in place to keep these kids healthy and alive was extremely useful. So, that is one of those relationships where, you know, you really do wonder, if you could travel back to the 16th century, it probably looks very different from what all the histories have said. I'm not saying it looks closer to how I've described. I mean, we're all dealing with these kind of mediated texts, and we all do the best that we can to kind of, you know, pull out the truth from them. But, you know, what we see or how we tell history is so affected by how other people have told history in the intervening centuries that it probably, you know, no matter how hard we try, looks different than probably what the truth actually is.

AT: Yeah. And I think one of the things that people have used to, you know, deride Catherine and present her as, you know, having a difficult time when she first got to France was this presenting of her as, you know, the child of Italian merchants, basically. So like you were saying, the Medicis were not royal. They were just, they were businesspeople. They were rich business people. And that xenophobia that we were talking about with Salic Law and everything, which funnily enough doesn't apply when we're talking about foreign queens, because women are weak (laughter). But it's interesting that, you know, you brought up that she was actually, you know, of French royal descent on her mother's side. And that just sort of gets ignored when you're trying to paint her as this outsider who doesn't deserve to be anywhere near the throne. But she and Diane were actually cousins, I believe.

LRC: Yes, they're related. They're related. Yeah. And, you know, people I think conveniently forget sometimes the, you know, Catherine's royal ancestry. And, you know, that that that partly happened, you know, when when she was young and during her lifetime, again, because, you know, xenophobia, like misogyny, it's a convenient rhetoric. If you don't like someone, you can use that against them. But at the same time, it's important to remember that one of the reasons why Francis I was so excited to have Catherine married into the royal family is because he liked Italians. You know, Francis was trying to make France as cool as he thought Italy was. You know, the Italians were really the arbiters of taste, especially the Medici. And Francis really admired Italian style and Italian literature and Italian art. And so he liked Catherine. And that's

one reason why she survives in the French court, even during those 10 years when she's barren is because she had an ally in the King and in the King's sister, Marguerite of Navarre, who's this, you know, really interesting, very educated woman, who liked Catherine. She liked her. And that should say something about Catherine, which, you know, I think we often miss.
Another thing that's often used against Catherine is the fact that when she was barren, she took a lot of fertility medicines. And this is ridiculed in the histories, you know, that she took potions and, you know, ate crazy stuff. But when you actually look through the receipt books or the recipe books at the time, this is the stuff that was prescribed. And a lot of people took them. And in fact, French courtiers were giving Catherine these medicines. They're just like fertility medicines. So it's sort of interesting that she's been singled out for having taken these things. But again, there seems to be this cultural investment in keeping Catherine as sort of the ridiculous evil queen, you know, that's sort of easy to pillory. And it's very hard to kind of unbury her, dig her out of all that.

AT: It's sort of funny that she's simultaneously apparently depicted as, you know, silly and easily fooled in that context. But then, you know, oh, this, you know, shrewd scheming - like, I just, I love when the undermining narratives don't match each other, like at least be connected.

LRC: Yes.

AT: But it's interesting that you're talking about, you know, a lot of how she survived at court for those barren years, because it, there are plenty of stories of queens being set aside when they can't produce an heir. And she was in a very tenuous position in that regard, because, you know, who's going to fight for her, who is powerful enough to keep her in that position? And in that regard, you talk about the different styles and the different strengths of the women, and particularly how Catherine's early experiences made her a survivor.

LRC: One of the delights of reading through their letters is, you know, getting the chance to glean some of their personality, to hear the voice, you know, in the letters, and then to try to create, get a sense of the larger character of these women. And, yeah, you know, one of the questions I've asked myself is, you know, why does one queen survive and the other ones, you know, fail or die? And, you know, some of it is biology, right? Some of it is just, you know, they get sick, or, you know, for some reason they die. Some of it might be choices. But one thing that you do see in Catherine, in particular, that you don't see in Mary Queen of Scots is a kind of tenacity, a kind of holding on, like maybe a grit. And you see that in her very young, and one of the very, you know, sort of early accounts of her, which is actually written after her, her lifetime, that, you know, when she's this prisoner and in the convent in Florence, and she, she makes this sort of last desperate attempt to resist one of her captors, who's a councilman from the Florentine Republican Council. I mean, you know, she stands up in front of him and she shouts at him. I can just imagine this little 11 year old girl shouting at this full grown man, and he seems a little taken aback. She was in a position where she, she had to be a fighter. You know, even when she was in that convent, you see her writing away, giving gifts to people, she's sort of building her network. And she had to do this very young. She had no choice but to do this if she

was going to survive. Whereas both Mary Queen of Scots and Elisabeth de Valois had this very different childhood, a very coddled, protected, spoiled childhood in many ways. It really, they're raised to be these beautiful ornaments with every luxury. They're flattered all the time. That just didn't happen to Catherine. And, and, and maybe that explains a little bit of, certainly with Mary, why she doesn't seem to have the same kind of political grit and a sense of needing to survive. I actually see a lot more similarities between Catherine and, not to bring the Tudors back again, but Elizabeth I of England, because Elizabeth also had this childhood that was quite rough in some ways. And, and isolated. And so learned a certain resilience and, and self-sufficiency, I should say, you know, and that's what Catherine has too. Catherine has a self-sufficiency that you don't necessarily see in the other queens quite as much.

AT: Now, I feel like we have fallen into a very common trap, which is that we've been talking about Catherine and Mary, and we've ignored Elisabeth. And I freely admit, I don't think I'd really heard of Elisabeth de Valois before, you know, I saw your book and said, Hey, let's have a conversation. And I think it makes sense in the context that she didn't, she wasn't as impactful, I don't think as the others, given what happened to her. So as we're talking about difficult experiences, she had a very pampered, loving, you know, the, the childhood her mother didn't have. But then once she went to Spain, she did have a really hard time.

LRC: Yeah, okay. So first, let me just say that the reason why I wrote this book was actually for Elisabeth de Valois. Initially, I wanted to write a book only about Elisabeth de Valois, but then she's so connected to these other queens. And then I was seeing these sort of similar themes popping up all over the place that the book just grew. And I actually thought the relationships were, were so interesting that I decided to build the book around that. But one of the things about Elisabeth, like you said, she's not as impactful, at least not in the way that we normally measure impactfulness. But she is a political player behind the throne. And certainly her mother saw her as, you know, someone who could wield a certain amount of political influence and needed to wield a certain amount of influence in Spain. And had she lived longer, I mean, I definitely believe that Catherine was grooming her daughter to become like Catherine, but in Spain, you know. One thing I should say is that political networks in Europe, you know, are fostered among men, but also between men and women and among women, you know, women have these powerful networks between them. And Catherine was clearly raising Elisabeth tobe an ally in Spain, one who could solidify an alliance between France and Spain. And so, so in that sense, Elisabeth being seen by her mother and others as a kind of, you know, for her potential is very interesting. But the other thing that just draws me to Elisabeth is that because she's a consort and not a ruling queen, she's actually more representative of the experience of most noble and aristocratic women of her time. What she lives through, including this sort of horrific pressure to bear children, which has huge impacts both on her physical health and on her mental health, is experienced by countless noble women of this time. And, you know, I love the stories of unsung women, right? I kind of feel like that's where we should be going. You know, we've heard so much about, you know, these extraordinary women, women who seem to defy the rules and the odds. And now more historians are talking about, like, other women you haven't heard of, and women who have, like, more ordinary lives,

because isn't it interesting to know what their experience was like? And I see that in Elisabeth, that even though, yes, she's a queen, she has a fundamentally sort of embodied experience as a woman that I think we should pay attention to.

AT: It's actually funny that you say that because I end every episode with the quote, well-behaved women rarely make history. And it's actually misinterpreted, broadly speaking, because the idea is that women have to act out and, you know, that's what we should be doing. But the original context was exactly what you're saying, is the average, well, I wouldn't say her life was average, but, you know, the common experiences that a lot of women have had, like the queen consorts, aren't the ones that we talk about. We talk about the outliers. We talk about the women who broke the mold, but that does leave out the majority of women who are in the mold. I don't know what the opposite is.

LRC: Yes, totally. Or following a sort of a set of rules. And, you know, the thing is the rules that Elisabeth must follow are the rules that create a dynastic system, like, you know, politics of the Renaissance is built on the backs of women like Elisabeth. And, you know, frankly, if the circumstances had been quite as extraordinary, Elisabeth's life and Catherine's life would have been quite similar because Catherine was also a queen consort, you know, whose job, whose principal job was to have all these children. So, you know, we should pay attention to that, not only because that was the experience of most women, but also because their stories are still interesting. You know, it's just that in previous histories or, you know, histories of a different age, they weren't seen as inherently interesting because they don't seem to mirror the experiences of men. And that's the thing about a lot of these extraordinary women who break the mold. Their experiences often seem interesting because they're closer to maybe what a man would have done or what, you know, a man would have experienced like a ruling queen, for instance. But, you know, I think that there is something inherently interesting about women's experience, the experience of most women. And I want to hear more of it. And I definitely wanted to write, write it as well.

AT: All right, so let's tell Elisabeth's story, assuming that most people listening haven't heard it. At age, I believe 14, Elisabeth is sent to Spain to marry a prince. So what happens from there?

LRC: So, okay, so Elisabeth's marriage is actually sort of the culminating act of a peace treaty that's forged between France and Spain to end these Italian wars that I talked about earlier, you know, that have gone on for decades. So it's a huge event. It's the wedding of the century. It's, you know, a massive political deal. And for this reason, the fact that she sort of, you know, represents the ending of these wars, she gets the nickname, Elisabeth or Isabel, as she's called in Spain, of peace, Elisabeth of peace. The thing is, is that right after her, her marriage, her father dies in a horrible jousting accident. And so this accelerates both the pace at which she has to adopt a political role when she gets to Spain, but also makes the political burden that much more fraught, because now it's more imperative than ever that France and Spain remain at peace with each other. So, so she, marries Philip II of Spain, who is the relatively new King of Spain. And he's already been married twice. He's 20 years older than her, just about. And he's

already been married twice, first to Maria Manuela of Portugal, who died in childbirth, and then to Mary Tudor of England, who also dies. And so Elisabeth is his third wife. And she gets to Spain, and she's a child, she's still playing with her toys. And Catherine, because she was so nervous about Elisabeth, and also about the new peace with Spain, sends a number of French courtiers with Elisabeth to make sure that Elisabeth is taken care of.
Now, the relationship between Catherine and Elisabeth is really interesting. Elisabeth is Catherine's oldest daughter. She's the first one to leave France in marriage. So this is the first time that Catherine has had to send a child, a beloved child, very far away, thinking perhaps that she'll never see her again. And she starts writing to Elisabeth immediately, and there's this really wonderful, rich correspondence between Catherine and her daughter. You know, and maybe because Elisabeth had to leave France under such dramatic circumstances, the cord is never really cut for both of them, right? Catherine really needs to emotionally need Elisabeth, and Elisabeth seems to emotionally need her mother too. And Elisabeth especially needs her mother because she's only 14 years old. And, you know, very quickly, it becomes clear that Catherine is going to need Elisabeth's political help.
Now, one of the things about a queen consort, as you said earlier, is that if they do not get pregnant and produce the heir fairly quickly, or at least show promise of producing the heir, they can get sent back or repudiated or, you know, we're going to take England into account, they can even be sent to the scaffold. So, you know, they better do it pretty quickly. And, and Catherine really needs Elisabeth to get pregnant because it also would increase Elisabeth's political standing so that she would have more influence, political influence with Philip II. The problem is, is that Elisabeth just really has trouble getting pregnant, just like her mother before her. She seems to inherit the same malady. And Elisabeth also seems to suffer from some other physical ailments that are chronic, and that really cause her a lot of trouble. So, you know, the Elisabeth that you meet in these letters early on, she's young, she's naive, she misses home. You know, she's not quite sure what her political role is, but she's also suffering physically quite a bit. So, you know, you really get this glimpse of this child who at the same time is trying to obey her mother, and please her husband, partially to please her mother, and also because she knows that the fate of France kind of rests on it. And she doesn't know if she can do so because her body is not under her control, like she can't, you can't just tell it what to do. She can't tell it to be healthy and to, and to get pregnant. So, so you really witnessed her struggles in her letters to her mother.

AT: It's interesting that as we're talking about how precarious it was to be a queen in any of the three areas of queendom, you are being held accountable for things that are completely outside of your control and may not even be the result of you. It may be the guy who's trying to impregnate you and failing because I'm just thinking, you know, Philip didn't impregnate Mary Tudor either.

LRC: No. And also, like, you know, even in the 16th century, it did seem to become obvious that one of the problems with Catherine's stability was actually Henry. But the, but the thing is, is that the person who was going to pay the price, as you say, was Catherine. You know, she could be repudiated. She could get sent back to Italy. Elisabeth could be repudiated and she could get

sent back to France. And if, if that happens, there's no future for a girl. You know, she's not going to get married again because a girl's value hinges on her fertility. And so, when you see these young women fighting, they're fighting, you know, for survival on so many levels, Elisabeth trying to get pregnant is fighting for her political stature at court. She's fighting for political influence with Philip, but she's also fighting for any sort of future because if she has to get sent back to France, that's it. That's it. She's, she's done. She goes to a convent. She's not going to get married again. No one's going to want her. I mean, even Mary Queen of Scots, you know, her efforts to get remarried for a second marriage, her value kind of had slipped a little because she had already been married once and she hadn't gotten pregnant. And, you know, the widow is just a little bit less appealing, this sort of young, nubile bride who maybe can, you know, produce all of these heirs.
So, there's so much at stake in, in, in a girl's fertility. People sometimes say, would you want to be a queen in the 16th century? Oh my gosh, absolutely not. You know, it was, it was horrific and the stress of it. And I do wonder if some of Elisabeth's health problems and the health problems suffered by many of these young women in these positions is, you know, definitely exacerbated by the stress of all of it.

AT: Like her mother, a lot of why she didn't get sent back is because Philip did actually love her. And it's interesting when you compare that to someone like Catherine of Aragon, who was also in a very tenuous position. So she married Henry VIII's older brother, Arthur. Arthur died. Henry is now in line, but Henry has fallen in love with Catherine. And so they, you know, justify it by claiming that her first marriage to Arthur was never consummated. And they end up married for quite some time. But when she loses his affection, that's when she is exiled. He literally started a whole new religion to try and divorce her. And that's Mary Tudor's mom, as we're talking about queens of the time. But it is fascinating to see just how much of women's power is reliant on being liked.

LRC: And that is where I think that we need to pay attention to Elisabeth de Valois, because it's very easy to forget that Philip liked her and then loved her. And that was something that Elisabeth had to work to get. And, you know, Catherine, when you see this in Catherine's letters, there's a bit of an imbalance. We have many more letters from Catherine to Spain than we have from Elisabeth back. We have enough to piece things together, but there are definitely a lot more letters from Catherine to Spain. But you see Catherine, you know, trying to teach her daughter how to get on Philip's good side, because she understood the value of that kind of affection, that it is its currency. And so, you know, when we talk about Elisabeth as a successful consort, one of the things she's doing that, you know, is a little bit unquantifiable or hard to kind of lay out perfectly in ways that we can see in sort of, you know, concrete terms, is that she was cultivating Philip's affection. She does it! And not only Philip's affection, frankly, the entire kingdom of Spain, because by the time she dies, she's beloved. She's beloved by everybody. She won everybody over. And, you know, that again, I think that sometimes, you know, we say, oh, no, it's because she was she was a nice girl. But, you know, she knew what to do. She knew how to deploy, you know, certain behaviors or certain sort of stereotypical feminine charms, the charms of the queen consort, something else that actually Mary Queen of Scots was quite good

at when she was a consort. And that that is its own form of political power that gets a little bit, you know, sort of brushed under the rug or dismissed or it just remains unseen. But it was very real.

AT: It's fascinating when you look at, like, say, African Americans code switching or autistic folks masking. I think it's the same thing, where you have someone who knows that they have to behave in a way that doesn't necessarily come naturally to them if they want to succeed. And people don't necessarily realize they're doing it. If you don't know the context of what's going on with that person and the cultural factors that have sort of forced them to do this, then it's really easy to assume that someone like Elisabeth, "well, she's just acting like a proper young woman because that's how women are naturally predisposed to behave." And it ignores the skill and the training and the effort that she was probably having to put into that.

LRC: And the political force of that, the consequences of that. That is something, you know, when we think of politics, we don't think about necessarily a genteel queen consort, you know, who's just wearing the kind of fashion that Philip likes, right? But, you know, this is part of the genius of Catherine de Medici was knowing that that kind of thing has political consequences. And it has political force just sort of wrapped up in this feminine guise that hasn't necessarily been identified as, you know, as inherently political, but it is inherently political.
And, you know, the amazing thing just to cut back to Catherine quickly is that, she know all this. And this is stuff that she learned from the moment she first set, you know, foot in France, probably from even earlier. But, you know, over years and years of watching and implementing and learning. And then by the time she's Queen Mother of France, it starts to become much more visible. But these are skills that she had learned over years. And then, you know, is trying to communicate and teach her daughter entirely through correspondence and the female French courtiers that she placed around Elisabeth to give her those same skills. It's a kind of apprenticeship.

AT: And it is one of the simultaneously entertaining and deeply frustrating things when you look at history and you think, what if? So you mentioned, you know, she is beloved in Spain when she died, when she was only 22. So she's been around for about eight years. She hasn't produced a male heir. She's had a few daughters that they did love. You know, it's said that they both "rejoiced at the birth of Isabella as if it had been the birth of a son," which feels like a backhanded compliment, but okay.

LRC: it was. (laughter) But what it showed, the birth of Isabella showed that she could carry a baby to term. So there's almost this hope, especially when a woman is that young, that she will eventually have the boy. So, you know, so that that's one reason why they loved Isabella in that way. But Philip continues to love his daughters. He's a very affectionate father, you know, well, well until their adulthood.

AT: And it is really, like I said, it's both intriguing and deeply frustrating to think what would have happened if she had lived as long as her mother instead of, you know, tragically dying so young.

LRC: And she dies doing the duty of a queen, right? Like that's, that's what it was supposed to be. So, so again, like in order to shore up their political influence or, you know, seal these alliances or to be a dutiful queen, she has to have the babies, but doing so might kill her. You know, all women know that. They know that they might die from in childbirth. And so there you have this paradox again that, you know, in order to be a perfect queen, your life is on the line. That's the nature of queenship.

AT: I mean, you even see that today with particularly in the US, we have ridiculously high maternal mortality rates. And obviously, you know, there's no longer that "your whole life situation is dependent on you producing a child". But the fact that there is still a significant drive for women to have babies. And then you see someone like Serena Williams, who obviously has a very different kind of power than the women we've been talking about. But, you know, even she had to really fight for doctors to pay attention to her when she had just given birth and said, "I need these tests run. I need this medication or I am going to have a serious medical emergency." And, you know, how many women who aren't international superstars, like if even she's having to fight to be listened to, how many women fight and don't succeed and it's just devastating.

LRC: I think that this is, you know, one of the values of writing about women who are in these powerful positions, whether they're Serena Williams or 500 years ago, Elisabeth de Valois, again, that they kind of, their lives aren't like the lives of, you know, average women, but they do crystallize something about the experience of women. And, you know, I'm always struck by women like Serena or other women, whether they're CEOs or athletes or whatever it is, you know, often they're defined as celebrity mother, like the mother is sort of attached, you know, as a kind of rounding out of, you know, a woman reaching her full identity because she's a mother, which is just patently ridiculous. But, you know, really shows something about our culture that we still attach something essential about the definition of motherhood to maternity. And yet, you know, for Serena, for plenty of other women, maternity is a health condition. It is, you know, it is, it is something that affects women's health. Often it can kill them, it certainly can threaten to kill them. And, you know, even in discussions that we're having now with the Dobbs case, or, you know, Roe versus Wade, there's this incredible politicizing of women's bodies and their ability to reproduce and their control over that reproduction, which goes part and parcel with our understanding of what womanhood is and the political importance of women in our society.

AT: I think a lot of times it's meant to soften a woman. So you see someone like Serena, who is incredibly physically powerful and incredibly prominent. And it's like, "okay, but you know, she's a mom," it's bringing you closer to that traditional idea of what femininity is supposed to be like for someone who has gone outside of that, whether they're a politician or an athlete, any sort of powerful woman who doesn't necessarily fit with these ancient stereotypes of what women are supposed to be.

LRC: When, when motherhood is attached to Serena Williams name, you know, perhaps it's

meant to soften her. But even so, like, it's like our culture is never satisfied. Not only would women have to be mothers, but they have to be a certain kind of mother. We do impose these stereotypes, these kind of tropes on women. And it's the only way that they seem to make sense to us.

AT: They have to fit a box or they don't make sense.

LRC: Right.

AT: So one last note that I wanted to make about Elisabeth was that there was a woman painter in her court at the time who has also been gaining more attention in recent years. And I find her really fascinating as well. So I was very intrigued that there was a connection there.

LRC: Oh, Sofonisba Anguissola. Yes. Oh, you know, they're sort of this cast of second-tier characters in Young Queens that were so fun to get to know. And Sofonisba was one of them. So most people who like art and art from the Renaissance have probably seen a portrait by Sofonisba. They just don't necessarily know that it was by her. Sofonisba was already a pretty famous painter in Italy before she joins the court of Elisabeth of Valois as a lady in waiting and she comes express at the invitation of Philip II. The Spanish at the time have control of, you know, big swaths of Italy. So it was sort of part of the empire. And Philip invites her to join the court, kind of as a maybe a little like a wedding present for Elisabeth because Elisabeth was an artist. She liked to draw a lot. And the thought was that Sofonisba would be a nice companion. Sofonisba speaks Italian and Elisabeth also spoke Italian and could teach her how to paint. So Sofonisba joins Elisabeth's court for the duration of Elisabeth's tenure as queen consort of Spain. And as she does teach the queen, the young queen how to paint. And she also paints the portraits of many figures at the time. So there are famous pictures of Juana of Austria by Sofonisba and Don Carlos by Sofonisba. She becomes one of Elisabeth's favorite ladies in waiting. And so she travels with her when Elisabeth travels. And eventually after Elisabeth dies, the two little infantas, the Spanish royal princesses are put in the care of Sofonisba for several years before Sofonisba returns to Italy to marry.
So one of the reasons why you don't know it's a Sofonisba portrait is that because she was a noblewoman in high standing with the queen of Spain, it was considered inappropriate for her to sign her works. So any painting she did, you know, at the time she didn't, she didn't sign.

AT: And the official court painter of the time was Alonso Sánchez Coello. He was less talented but he was male. And so later years he was largely giving credit for her works even though he seems to have worked mostly as her assistant. And she also had her works misattributed to artists like Titian, Zurbaran, Giovanni Battista Moroni. So clearly, her works were good because they're being misattributed to these talented men. But it is nice that in recent years she has had this sort of rediscovery and you know, misattributions are being corrected and she's being appreciated now. So hopefully Elisabeth de Valois will also get a little more appreciation.

LRC: Yeah, yeah, and actually my favorite portrait of Elisabeth was done by Sofonisba about 20

years after Elisabeth's death. And it probably wasn't exactly from memory, it was probably based on a portrait that she had already done. But I always feel like it's definitely tinged by Sofonisba's memory of Elisabeth because Sofonisba loved Elisabeth, really did. I mean, she really mourned her death. And this portrait is so beautiful and luminous. And you know, to me it sort of represents what Elisabeth, the stature that Elisabeth had in Sofonisba's memory. But yes, you know, the painter and the queen, you know, are sort of getting rediscovered at the same time.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.